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Other: Beauvoir's Existential Feminism

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Other: Beauvoir's Existential Feminism

Abstract

Simone De Beauvoir considered *The Second Sex* to be more of a “reflection,” rather than a war-cry or how-to book for women to follow. The existentialism it contained is there simply because Beauvoir herself identified with the approach of experience being the common core of self-discovery. In truth, existentialism is quite possibly the only school of philosophical thought that adequately allows for an in-depth examination of what being a woman means. The language of existentialism is, in fact, the only approach that proves useful in approaching a discussion of feminism. While Beauvoir's influences and interests tended toward an existential view, it is doubtful that she forced or bent the struggle for equality for women into that particular mold. Instead, she rightfully sees the connection between the feminine experience and the necessity of taking responsibility. Beauvoir's sole point is not that woman should ask to be equal; instead, she advocates a woman approaching her life as if she simply is – something Beauvoir evinced for herself, proving the possibility. In *The Second Sex*, noted philosopher and feminist Simone De Beauvoir used the Hegelian term “other” to cut to the heart of the feminine psyche, and Beauvoir's existentialist purview has been adopted by modern feminists in part because the language of existentialism perfectly conveys the female struggle for equality.

Cover Page Footnote

Dennis Arjo, PhD, served as the JCCC faculty adviser for this paper.

In 1998 news of an illicit affair between then-President Bill Clinton and intern Monica Lewinsky dominated newspaper headlines and provided endless fodder for both television talking heads and late-night comedians. Clinton, who had purposely worked to draw favorable allusions between himself and John F. Kennedy became embroiled in the sort of image-destroying disgrace that JFK, in a different time, had adroitly side-stepped; whereas the late president's infidelities were whispered about and hinted at, Clinton's were laid bare. For months, the country was saturated in minute details: she kept the dress! The dress was blue! It contained a tell-tale amount of ejaculate. In truth, the nation fascinated in the story, perhaps because the base scenario bordered on the trite, typical and almost scripted: older, powerful man and the young, starry-eyed naïf engaged in the sort of extra-curricular workplace romps which are salacious and titillating simply *because* they are forbidden. But Clinton and Lewinsky were not the only key players in the disgrace: First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Lewinsky's poorly-chosen confidante, Linda Tripp, were front and center as well. Together and separately, these four, central individuals became something of a microcosmic universe, and served to illustrate on a large scale the balance of power, gender, and sex in politics – and America.

Were we to remove the official titles, however, and unsurprisingly, the “roles” played remain the same, and what may be most interesting in what we take away is that three of the four prominent players were women, and none of them fared well to the public. In the wake of the Lewinsky scandal, gender roles and perceptions were illuminated in an ugly light, showing us how women were – and still may be – perceived. As the lone male in the equation, but without doubt at least fifty percent as culpable as Lewinsky herself, Bill Clinton fared well enough; while he may have been embarrassed and the very real threat of impeachment may have hung over his

head, arguably Clinton, halfway through his second presidency, had very little of any real import to lose.

The same cannot be said for the women involved. Public opinion slotted each of them neatly into archetypal positions that were easily identifiable to a country with an attention span best suited to tabloid reading and sound bytes. Lewinsky was, in turn, the innocent taken advantage of, and the scheming Other Woman who used her body for glory and gain. The First Lady, never a media darling, was either the “Cold Bitch” whose starved husband had no choice but to seek comfort elsewhere, or – seemingly worse – alleged to be a closeted lesbian. Linda Tripp seems to have gotten off easily, and was simply the gossipy friend, out for revenge. While none of these women came through unscathed, the damage to Hillary Clinton and Linda Tripp is negligible in comparison to Lewinsky who was, at the time, in her early twenties; still an impressionable age, particularly for women, when self-image is formed but not cemented. Lewinsky’s physical appearance was constantly at issue. Typically, she was characterized as being neither thin nor pretty enough to be a presidential mistress – once again, a reference to the previously noted Clinton-crafted allusion to JFK and Marilyn Monroe; where Monroe was curvaceous and *zaftig*, Lewinsky was merely fat. Seemingly, every detail of her life was up for debate and open to judgment; Lewinsky recalls tuning in to a morning talk show and hearing no less than Erica Jong discussing whether or not she had stage three gum disease.

While we may look back on the Lewinsky scandal and note that it almost – but not quite – toppled a sitting president; calls for the impeachment and resignation of Bill Clinton were by no means widespread, but might be seen as a harbinger of the partisan politics we see on a larger scale today. Instead, the Lewinsky scandal demonstrates a failure on the part of feminism. The wholesale disenfranchisement and dismissal of women by relegation to “role” based on gender is

nothing new. Historically, women have been set apart from men via physical, emotional, and mental parameters – but choose to separate from each other. In *The Second Sex*, noted philosopher and feminist Simone De Beauvoir used the Hegelian term “other” to cut to the heart of the feminine psyche, and Beauvoir’s existentialist purview has been adopted by modern feminists in part because the language of existentialism perfectly conveys the female struggle for equality.

A Reluctant Philosopher

Beauvoir admitted to Margaret Simons in a 1979 interview that her *The Second Sex* was written purely from her own experiences (337), but chafed at the notion she had written any sort of feminist philosophy: “Spinoza, Hegel, or Sartre [are philosophers]; someone who has built a great system... A philosopher is somebody who builds... truly builds a great system, and that I did not do” (338). This denial on Beauvoir’s part is not borne of any sort of modesty (false or otherwise). She considered *The Second Sex* to be a “reflection,” rather than a war-cry how-to book for women to follow. The existentialism contained therein is simply because Beauvoir herself identified with the approach of experience being the common core of self-discovery. In truth, existentialism is quite possibly the only school of philosophical thought that adequately allows for an in-depth examination of what being a woman means.

Deirdre Bair in *Simone De Beauvoir: a Biography* entitles with sly irony a chapter exploring Beauvoir’s early life, “The Girl with a Man’s Brain,” though there is more to it than clever word-play: although the young Beauvoir was part of the French Bourgeoisie through her lineage, her immediate family was not particularly well-off. Her father educated Beauvoir, in part to prepare her for the life of a young French girl whose family lacked the funds for a dowry (Bair 27). Her formative years were indeed a rich field of exploration for Beauvoir, but one

might be cautious in making inference: there is no evidence to suggest Beauvoir's father, Georges, desired a son. Rather, he was practically educating Beauvoir for an eventual reality. Beauvoir's earliest education was in-line with that of male children of the time. Consistently, Beauvoir admits in interviews that the "typical" woman's experience of the time – traditional marriage and children -- was really never something she craved, but rather something she felt a need to avoid.

“Other”: Beauvoir Defines Woman In Men's Terms

In order to grasp the connectedness of Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, a clear and fundamental definition of the base terms must be given. Hence, the Oxford English Dictionary defines existentialism as, “A philosophical theory or approach that emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will,” and feminism as “The advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men.” From the first, the two definitions may seem at odds with each other. Women, as Beauvoir notes, are typically defined by men, leaving them little opportunity to progress through their own actions. Central to this is Beauvoir's use of “Other” for women. Used in the Hegelian sense, “Other” refers to the opposite of what one is attempting to define. Much is made of Beauvoir's initial definition of woman early on in *The Second Sex*. When Beauvoir opines, “Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary: she is a female – this word is sufficient to define her” (3). While unfairly characterized as something of an indictment against masculine constraints, Beauvoir is getting at something deeper: this language defines woman in biological terms, and nothing more. Woman, as per Beauvoir, has been typified and termed by what her body is capable of bringing forth and little else, but there is nothing inherently sexist in this characterization, and we see this same

classic depiction of women throughout the span of history: fertility goddesses in primitive art are impossibly voluptuous, alluding to the bounty of agricultural harvest and the all-important blessing of the sons that they bring. Greco-Roman artwork and statuary tend to be more realistic in their portrayals, but the emphasis on feminine curves remains. Beauvoir's definition of woman as the sum of her parts, so to speak, holds true historically. But Beauvoir, herself, is not necessarily scoffing at this interpretation: the human woman simply *is* capable of gestating and bearing offspring; she is simply employing the concept of "Other" with the broadest strokes possible.

It is later in the definition that Beauvoir makes what can be construed as an emphatic statement about how women are viewed in her use of "fanciers of simple formulas." One of the simple joys of reading Beauvoir is coming to the conclusion that, in a classically French way, she has said much but used few words to do so, and this statement is impossibly droll: one may interpret "simple formulas" to mean that either the formulas *or* the fanciers are unsophisticated and their tastes and intellects facile. Further, she notes that man embraces his animal nature, but uses the animality of woman as an "epithet," as that man derogatorily projects the behavior of insect and animal females onto human women (3-4). She is setting herself up to explore what happens when the "platitudes" and pretense regarding what it means to be female drop away, but something more exists within the reference of various, purely animal behaviors: animals have been conquered and are used *by* man (in the sense of "mankind,") and to his own ends. In the same way, man believes he has conquered woman, as well. When we remember that everyone from Aristotle to Descartes placed man firmly at the apex of the animal kingdom, the female is close – but just misses.

Beauvoir: on Female Sexuality

Beauvoir's hint towards woman's secondary status is additionally clarified when she discusses the sexual language men employ, and the force inherent within. To wit: "Even when she is willing, provocative, it is unquestionably the male who *takes* the female – she is *taken*" (21). Though we note that woman is defined by her biology to be "Other" to man, she is also hindered by her biology and anatomical make up. Through the act of penetration, Beauvoir sees the female as once again subservient to the male, and she is violated internally. Because the female anatomy plays a role in naming what woman is (as well as what she is not,) the act of (even willing) sexual congress is invasive to both the female body and psyche. In male/female, reproductive sexual intercourse, at no point is the male traditionally "entered" by the female. This allows him, according to Beauvoir, to remain aloof and above the act; he has shared nothing from the inside (22).

Is there a grain of truth to Beauvoir's assertion that the male lacks an emotional investment or internalization with respect to sex? While modern males are encouraged to "feel their feelings" and be more expressive, it would be fundamentally flawed to assume that all men, throughout all time, were emotionally distant with respect to the aspects of the sexual act. Primarily, we have no way of proving such a thing, and anyone who has ever read the Roman poet Catullus's erotic poems to his beloved Lesbia would immediately disagree. Moreover, in discounting the range of feeling within men on a broad, generalized scale, we become willful hypocrites and reduce men to the same "animal" status that Beauvoir claims is thrust upon women.

One must note, however, that much of what Beauvoir bases some of these ruminations on is in direct response to the theories and psychoanalytic techniques of Sigmund Freud. Because most (if not all) of Freud's work has recently come under intense and unfavorable scrutiny,

Beauvoir's concession to the "validity" of some of his theories is, of course, *wrong*. Freud himself was keen on the concept of "hysteria" -- a frequently diagnosed, yet mysterious condition which, like menstrual cramps and breech births, afflict only women. There is considerable evidence that the diagnosis was handed out freely (not to mention unethically) by Victorian doctors unsure of how to handle the complaints of female patients – and their husbands. The medical community has not recognized "hysteria" as an official diagnosis for decades, yet allusions to the illness persist, and the phrase "hysterical woman" brings a vivid picture to mind: she is a female beyond reason, something of an animal, and irrational. Whether intentional or not, Beauvoir's allusions to animal behavior being the basis of men's perception of women is clever, and made more so by her dissection of Freud's views toward women.

Beauvoir has, at this point, defined woman at her basis. The fundamental biology of the woman leads neatly to the woman's role as a sexual creature and it is through a woman's own sexual conquests that her other roles become apparent: wife and mother, and the definition of being existent seems farther than ever from the feminist grasp. What seemingly and frequently gets lost in Beauvoir's reflective feminism is that at no time is she ever issuing a call to arms, *per se*; instead, Beauvoir adroitly provides an existentialist "primer" intended to allow a woman to quietly acknowledge her "place" through the definition by the masculine tongue, in order to better understand her role and thus: master it in her own way.

Hegel: Master and Slave

Having defined women with the use of "Other," Beauvoir delves into the roles women experience. Beauvoir relies heavily on Darwinism and survival of the species in explaining masculine behavior: men, by their natures, conquer and master their environments. Women's role in this respect is also relegated to that of "Other." Women are not active participants in

battle, but find their place before and after. There is utility in each role, however; biology makes man incidental to the species: his role is to “remodel” the earth, while women are tasked with “tending” (64). Beauvoir believes that Hegel’s analogy of master and slave perfectly applies to men and women. Beauvoir quotes Hegel directly: “The other consciousness is the dependent consciousness for who the essential reality is the animal type of life; that is to say, a mode of being bestowed by another entity” (64). Man has not only defined women, but also neatly delineated her parameters. Within Beauvoir’s historical scope, the statement captures the limited role of women. Although women make up a significant part of the workforce and enjoy a greater freedom today than they certainly did in Beauvoir’s time, there remains a double-standard in effect that might never completely fade: women balance home and work, while no such expectation exists wholly for men. This speaks to Beauvoir’s summation of the reality that males have constructed for females:

He it is who opens up the future to which she also reaches out. In truth women have never set up female values in opposition to male values; it is man who, desirous of maintaining masculine prerogatives have invented that divergence. Men have presumed to create a feminine domain – the kingdom of life, of immanence – only in order to lock up women therein. (65)

Further, she points out that women have never asked to be recognized as existents and equals. Interestingly, Beauvoir provides this prescription which, on its surface, seems easily done. Yet within a patriarchy, little evidence exists to suggest that this would be so. While Beauvoir is recommending women recognize their inherent power, it is rather short-sighted to assume that women of that time – or any other – could simply ask and receive true equality to men and on their own merit as human beings. One would presume that Beauvoir, simply by her stature as a

feminist icon, might enjoy a measure of this respect; ironically though, Beauvoir is frequently cast as “lesser” to her partner, Jean Paul Sartre.

Sartre & Beauvoir

Beauvoir met Sartre during her “practice teaching” required for her degrees and certifications in philosophy through the French university system (Bair 136). Sartre, an existentialist himself, is notable for *On Being and Nothingness*. Sartre may well have been the seminal influence on Beauvoir’s work and life. Though never legally married, the two shared an unconventional, “open” sexual relationship, where each enjoyed relationships with others as they saw fit. There seems to be little evidence of the friction one would expect in such a relationship. Rather, as the subject of Sartre seems to arise in every facet of every interview Beauvoir granted – even those presumably meant to be about her own work. However, she remains matter-of-fact whether discussing Sartre, herself or the nature of their partnership. This might well be expected, for Beauvoir and Sartre might well be considered, in the modern vernacular, a “power couple.” Though Beauvoir is always careful to stress her field was literary – not philosophical, to Simons she states that she and Sartre read and critiqued each others’ work. When asked of Sartre’s reaction to her opinions, Beauvoir said, “He did what I told him to do. When I told him that the first version of *The Respectful Prostitute* was very bad, he completely rewrote it” (337). Beauvoir insisted that same held true for Sartre’s criticisms of her own writing. It seems that theirs was a true partnership in every sense.

Yet for all of Beauvoir’s own reputation, Sartre cast a constant shadow in her life and over her work. Simons, without any obvious guile, asked Beauvoir during the 1979 interview if her ideas of woman were purely her [Beauvoir’s] own or if, as it sometimes appeared to Simons, they had come from Sartre. Beauvoir responded with an emphatic “Oh! No! Absolutely not”

(338). According to Beauvoir, Sartre had no interest in women (from a “rights” standpoint,) and her ideas were solely her own. One might wonder if it is admirably brave or foolish to intimate to Beauvoir that her ideas came from a man, but it illustrates both the principle of “Other” that Beauvoir uses to define woman, as well as the common misconception that, as the woman, Beauvoir was necessarily subservient to Sartre. Beauvoir is clear on Sartre’s influence on her: as a philosopher, she considered him brilliant and she learned from him. By the same token, she maintains he learned from her (Bair 148). Beauvoir seems fiercely protective of her own autonomy, as well as the integrity of her work: “...when I wrote my memoirs... when I wrote my novels, I was never influenced by Sartre because I was writing from my lived and felt experiences” (Simons 339). Though Simons continued to push Beauvoir to admit Sartre’s hand in her writing, Beauvoir remained dispassionately adamant that her work was her own.

In light of this, we can recall Beauvoir urging women to assert their rights to be considered “equal” to men. Something of a conundrum exists in simply acknowledging that a gulf exists between women and men based on, as Beauvoir defines it, mere biology and how one is what the other is not. Beauvoir spent much of her life insisting and claiming possession of her own work against the ever-present Sartre (an irony which becomes heavier when we realize they never shared the same living quarters). Published in 1949, *The Second Sex* was written twenty years into her unconventional partnering with Sartre, yet questions about his contributions to her *thoughts* persisted until her death in 1986 and unfortunately, it seems as though speculation will always remain.

Beauvoir does not seem to have been too terribly put out by these questions. One does not find anecdotes of her reacting angrily or even particularly fiercely. With a simple aplomb,

she asserted her ownership of the work and redirected Simons. Beauvoir evinces precisely what she has exhorted women to do in *Sex*: live as though you are not other.

Because she is a woman, Beauvoir's work – as well as her actions – rings true; she attains a meta-understanding of not only the implications of womanhood, but also becomes something of an example – an honorific she might shrug off. Beauvoir, for all the praise heaped upon her, comes off as a genuinely modest and unassuming individual in others' recollections. Throughout the interview with Simons, her tone is matter-of-fact and she is quick to give Sartre the credit he is due. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that when she notes Sartre's brilliance or how much she has learned from him she does so because he is a man or because they have been intimately involved for most of their lives. Ultimately, Beauvoir's respect is based on the idea that human beings – regardless of gender – deserve credit and blame as circumstances warrant. We may erroneously see *Sex* as a “feminist manifesto,” when in truth, Beauvoir is simply commenting on being *human*. Her perceptions are truly gender-blind.

The same courtesy though, as we have seen, is sometimes denied to Beauvoir purely on the basis of her sex, as it is often perceived that Sartre is the puppet-master working her strings on the other side of the curtain. This, of course, does her a great disservice by fundamentally discounting her considerable intellect. However, Beauvoir is certainly not the first woman to endure this bias.

The Woman's Condition

Beauvoir points out, “the antifeminists obtain from the study of history two contradictory arguments: (1) women have never created anything great; and (2) the situation of women has never presented the flowering of great feminine personalities” (133). While Beauvoir takes exception to this notion based on the idea that the few are not sufficient to determine the

collective, one might note a deeper problem at the core: throughout history, women have done great deeds. However, recording history had been, for quite some time, the sole purview of males.

In researching the conditions of women in the ancient world, particularly Rome, one finds a wealth of sources and an abundance of notable, laudable women – yet very little evidence of the woman’s life exists as written in her own words. In 42 A.D., Hortensia, daughter of the great Roman orator, Q Hortensius, addressed the Roman Senate on the unfair tax burden triumvirs placed upon the families of legions in the field. The speech, in its entirety, was recorded for both its erudition and passion – and possibly because women were forbidden to address the bar. In recording it, historian Valerius Maximus, noted that the speech was good and should be saved, making certain to point out that a woman had spoken the words – something of a conceit, given the nature of Roman naming customs. Women of ancient Rome were all named for their clan and *pater-familia* affiliation – hence, the profusion of females named “Julia” and “Claudia” in the Julio-Claudian line. Thus, Hortensia’s gender was already a matter of record once her name was entered; reinforcing the fact was redundant (Best; qtd. Mosier-Dubinsky 10).

From this vantage point, it is impossible to conscientiously take point one seriously. In the span of time since *Sex* was published, women have certainly done great things. Further, one of the key elements of feminism in a modern sense is the idea of giving women choices – and to support those choices. The infighting between women apropos the validity of choosing “career” over “mother” is weirdly fascinating in the same way Erica Jong commenting on Monica Lewinsky’s gums is – and in the same way Margaret Simons pressing Simone De Beauvoir to admit Sartre’s imagined puppetry is: feminism should transcend gender and allow women the

same freedom of choice that men have enjoyed for centuries (and you can be certain that no one ever noted that Mark Antony was male when he addressed the Senate after Caesar's murder).

Beauvoir's second point, however, proves problematic, because it does point to something deeply rooted in patriarchal societies, and to certain extent, exists to this day. Though women are in integral part of the workforce today, they are still at a distinct disadvantage. Women, on average, are paid less than men, and women are sometimes seen as "riskier" investments to a company, given the nature of pregnancy. This is by no means universal, but to pretend it has been completely eradicated is foolishness. Moreover, the wholesale discounting of "men" as a group is well avoided, too. Men – as much as women – are the product of their environments. Attitudes are changing on a larger scale than ever before, but women's environments have not allowed for lateral success to that of men.

On the Myth of Woman

From the first, as we've seen Beauvoir note that it is the simple fact of differing biology that separates the genders. This basis permeates all of existence, then; both the male and the female see the broad-stroked, literary portrayal of women and often confuse the fantasy of fiction with reality. Beauvoir catalogs the "myth" in real life as both static, with allusions to Platonic forms in the "Eternal Feminine"; and the fluid, ever-changing myth of woman (253).

To Beauvoir, the Eternal Feminine exists only within our minds and, "...projects into the realm of Platonic ideas a reality that is directly experienced or is conceptualized on a basis of experience, in place of fact, value, significance, knowledge, empirical law; it substitutes a transcendental Idea, timeless, unchangeable, unnecessary." Further, Beauvoir notes that the concept of an Eternal Feminine is irrefutable since it is largely comprised of what is "immutable truth" (253). In the same way that Plato held each and every object to exist in the intelligible

realm in perfect forms, Beauvoir believes that the fantasy of the “perfect woman” would exist there, as well; this standard is what both men and women envision the Eternal Feminine. While the details and characterization might change over time and between cultures, Eternal Feminine is the “yardstick” used to judge women. The problem, of course, is that living women tend to disappoint when held to perfection (through no fault of their own, of course), but the pervasiveness of this ideal further separates the sexes and damages women: “[to] pose as Woman [Eternal Feminine] is to pose the absolute Other, without reciprocity, denying against all experience that she is a subject, a fellow human being” (253). In simple language, women are separate (“Other”) to men, but further a divide amongst themselves when competing with an imagined ideal.

In reality, women vary greatly from one another in any number of aspects – from their body shape to their hair color. This is true from an emotional and temperamental standpoint, as well. However, the simple presence of similarity in their reproductive system makes them the same in both their own eyes and the eyes of men. Beauvoir, however, may have touched on what, exactly, has allowed the beauty industry to rake in billions of dollars of profit annually: there has always been an ideal, there is an ideal, and there will be an ideal of “woman” – with women’s permission, of course. In the same way we might simply ask for our rights, women might also refuse to play along with the idea of the Eternal Feminine. Beauvoir concedes, however, that the notion of Eternal Feminine saturates societies, and escaping its influence requires something from within.

While the so-called “static myth” of the Eternal Feminine is damaging, the more fluid myths that women live with are just as bad. Beauvoir lists what we can consider feminine archetypes: the virgin, the mother, the whore, the crone. Each mythical woman has what

Beauvoir calls an antonym, or opposite, and "... [the] saintly mother has for correlative the cruel stepmother, the angelic young girl has the perverse virgin" (254). Thus we split each fluid myth into subsets and in this way further typify women by aspect. The true nature of these myths, as Beauvoir sees them, are that they fulfill a dangerous proposition for women, for their use – by both men *and* women – justify any treatment *to* women. As she opines, "Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myth of woman: it justifies all privileges and authorizes all abuse" (255).

The Female Cogito

Though Beauvoir sees women and men as sharing equally in the culpability of embracing the myths of womanhood, the concept of the "feminine mystery," as she terms it, seems to appeal more the male. Perhaps quaintly, Beauvoir notes that a woman, by her nature is not one for mystery (259); this is a construct that has been forced upon her by a male domination. One might surmise, however, that the nature of a woman's body in which her reproductive organs are, unlike a man's, secreted away lends itself to an air of the unknown. Further, for centuries, female fertility and ovulation remained inexplicable, and birth control options were often limited to the ineffective means of luck, chance, wriggling, and the invocation of mercy from a favored god. The woman's physical anatomy is once again at the root of her separation, but men see the "mystery," according to Beauvoir, as something else yet to be conquered – though menses and childbirth are often distasteful to males (259).

Beauvoir believes the idea of feminine mystery is further based, in part, on the idea that "womanly knowledge" is willfully withheld (259). Coupled with the lack of solid, working knowledge of the mechanics of conception, this makes sense; up until relatively recently, women were given more credit than their due with respect to the mechanics of conception, often

“blamed” for infertility and erroneously thought to determine the sex of the fertilized embryo. Though Beauvoir is willing to concede that biologically, yes: woman is “Other,” she balks entirely at the notion that the feminine mind is somehow intrinsically different from that of a man. In denying Descartes’ *Cogito* and building it directly into the myth of womanhood (whether static or fluid,) Beauvoir sees the feminine mystery as, indeed, a mystery, for “...it would be a mystery in itself from the fact that it would be mystery for itself; it would be Absolute mystery” (259).

Because the feminine myths prove useful to men we can account for their perpetuation over time and through generations. To Beauvoir’s eye, the genesis of the myth is purely an invention of man in an effort to continue slotting woman as “Other.” We might note that, while masculine archetypes exist, rarely do they convey the same messages as their female counterparts. The male ne’er-do-wells are most often portrayed as dangerous, but wholly masculine and seductive. In the case of the feminine, the “bad girl” as confident and comfortable in her sexuality is a relatively new development, yet is often still interpreted with a sense that she is obligated to feel some sort of shame. Cliché though it may be, if a man is ambitious, he is driven to succeed; a woman in similar circumstance is merely a “bitch.”

Woman as Womb

“In maternity,” Beauvoir writes, “a woman fulfills her physiological destiny... since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species” (484). The whole of Beauvoir’s interpretation of feminism balances on the crucial component of the biological differences between men and women. Beauvoir’s discussion of “The Mother” should not be confused with the *myth* or archetype of the mother as previously discussed. Instead, Beauvoir is arguing the pressure to *be* a mother which is exerted on women. Beauvoir and Sartre did not

have children together, nor did she feel a particularly overwhelming urge toward motherhood. At no point does Beauvoir sneer at the agency of motherhood, though; like anything else she discusses as being typically “female,” the wrong approach is only through societal (or masculine) compulsion.

In light of the introduction of reliable contraceptive methods in the mid-part of the twentieth century, Beauvoir's discussion on methods of birth control in her own time (484) seems charmingly antiquated. Likely, though she is not specific, she is referring to methods akin to those of birth control advocate, Margaret Sanger. Sanger, who founded Planned Parenthood, studied world-wide birth control methods searching for effective means of family planning. While the withdrawal and douching methods advised by Sanger proved more effective than the simple guessing and orally-ingested herbal concoctions often previously favored by women, they were by no means reliable or fool-proof. However, Sanger offered a step in the direction of woman mastering her biology.

Beauvoir sees birth control as such: woman is no longer a slave to her ovaries, and neither is she asked to forgo her pleasure to avoid impregnation. However, Beauvoir also notes that patriarchy – notably naming the Catholic faith (484) – insists on instilling shame within women for taking any sort of steps toward contraception. Beauvoir's point is that man's biological imperative is to reproduce and woman is the only vessel available.

With the questionable efficacy of available contraceptive methods, abortion in Beauvoir's time could be considered a means of birth control. There is nothing to suggest that women made such decisions lightly nor should we assume its use proves its acceptance. Instead, the termination of a pregnancy was simply the way out once a couple had been, as Beauvoir puts it, “caught.” She notes hypocrisy inherent to abortions: an author might rhapsodize for pages about

childbirth, but the mention of an abortion will surely have him accused of “wallowing in filth” (485), because abortions then (as now,) prove to be polarizing.

There is an inherent unfairness to the issue of reproductive rights. The burden of preventing pregnancy has often fallen on the woman. With the outbreak of the AIDS virus in the 1980s, a disease most commonly spread by sexual intercourse and the exchange of bodily fluids, for the first time, men were encouraged to take an active and responsible role in their sexual relationships. Condoms, which are reasonably effective in protecting against AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, prove to be remarkably effective as well in preventing pregnancy – though this seemed incidental in most of the marketing campaigns aimed at men. More often, advertisements emphasized that the use of condoms was something a man could do in order to ensure he’d stay healthy enough to continue having sex; the onus of preventing babies remained on the woman. Abstinence, as we have been told, is the only method of birth control that is 100% effective 100% of the time. The impracticality of this position tends to fall on deaf ears often though; given that sex is a biological drive within us.

Women are at a distinct disadvantage, Beauvoir notes. Not only do the “rules” claim she must not be overtly sexual lest she be shamed, she has no choice but to acquiesce to the man’s more “legitimate” drives. The result of this imbalance is enforced motherhood, according to Beauvoir, wherein “wretched infants [are brought into this world] whom their parents will be unable to support and who will become the victims of public care.” Further, she rails that a “society that will fight for the rights of an embryo shows little care once it is born” (485). Prescience aside, Beauvoir is making a very real point about the way a woman’s body is used to subjugate and trap her. But a woman’s sole purpose is to bear children, and the woman who chooses not to – once or ever – is vilified and reviled, and made to feel that she has failed *as a*

woman. In something close to a full circle, Beauvoir's original simplistic definition seems prophetic: a woman is a womb, an ovary, and because of that, she is the Hegelian "Other" set against man and his wishes.

Conclusion

The language of existentialism is, in fact, the only approach that proves useful in approaching a discussion of feminism, and particularly, the existentialist feminism of Simone De Beauvoir. While her influences and interests tended toward an existential view, she does not force or bend the struggle for equality for women into that particular mold. Instead, she rightfully sees the connection between the feminine experience and the necessity of taking responsibility. Beauvoir's sole point is not simply that woman should ask to be equal; instead, she advocates a woman approaching her life as if she simply is – something Beauvoir evinced for herself, proving the possibility. In *The Second Sex*, noted philosopher and feminist Simone De Beauvoir used the Hegelian term "other" to cut to the heart of the feminine psyche, and Beauvoir's existentialist purview has been adopted by modern feminists in part because the language of existentialism perfectly conveys the female struggle for equality.

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