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The Agony of the Woman in Love

Passion, love, and desire have a fundamental role in Simone de Beauvoir's writings. In *the Second Sex*, she establishes the purpose love plays in the conception of a woman's self. The emphasis of love is not equal among the sexes, which arises through feelings of contentment and entrapment on both ends. She offers an escape from this circumstance: the solution is to acknowledge our commonality as human beings and treat each other as equals. Though she posits this plausible reality of freedom, her literature offers only negative abstractions of love. *The Mandarins* demonstrate various accounts of women and their relationships, none of which escape the confines of the cynical version of love. In this paper, I will argue that, by depicting love in only the negative, de Beauvoir fails to actualize her proposed emancipation for both sexes and, further, that this makes her positive version of love intangible, seemingly impossible to achieve, especially within our current system. After laying out the cynical and positive versions of love as described in *the Second Sex*, I will draw on de Beauvoir's novel to show how this narrow depiction binds women to defeatism, agony, and neuroticism, while also upholding the cyclical nature of hatred between men and women. Finally, I will argue that the possibility of a positive love should not be forgotten, and the means to achieve this virtue should extend to our contemporary reality.

Simone de Beauvoir presents her ideologies of gender and love in *The Second Sex*. To begin assessing her conception of love, let us first focus on the imbalance within genders. De Beauvoir strongly emphasizes the different ways in which men and women define their Selves.

She states that the “boy also dreams of woman, he desires her; but she will never be more than one element in his life: she does not encapsulate his destiny; the little girl... has awaited the male for accomplishment and escape... he holds the key to happiness” (*The Second Sex*, 341). Here, she is making the distinction that men are the center of a woman’s universe while women are only an element of a man’s life. Because of this, a man is able to live for himself and merely integrate women into his pre-established existence without losing himself (638). On the contrary, a woman must find purpose in life through men, she does not have the tools nor means to exist for herself. The desire for a man is more than a craving for affection, it is a means to freedom since he **is** the key. When a man does love her, “she does not separate man's desire from the love of her own self” (350). She values herself through his eyes, which appear more important than her own perspectives or evaluations. The unequal emphasis on men’s thoughts and impressions plays into defeatism, in which a girl no longer considers herself responsible for her future and develops apathy towards her life. Since men are regarded as the sole actor in life, the positive subject, women’s capacity is limited to the negative. She embodies the role of the object, to which things are done, and from this lack of action grows despair or indifference towards her life. In summation, she has lost her Self and accepts her existence as the man’s inessential Other (342).

The woman in love, by defining herself through men, has relinquished control over her life. She is but “an anguished and powerless witness of her own destiny” (707). It is the man who now “holds her destiny in his hands without completely realizing it and without completely wanting it” (707). This is where contemptment begins. The woman lives in an understandable state of fear and anxiety because she has no real influence over her future. As the Other, whose passivity exacerbates in love, her existence is indistinguishable from her relationship with the

man, insofar as “she is only love, and when love is deprived of its object, she is nothing” (704). Her being is intrinsically tied to the man, who, as an autonomous subject, can decide to leave her at any moment. This dynamic inevitably leads to unrequited dependency. The man can never understand her dependency because he is not subjected to it. He, with his freedom, instead perceives it as neediness, a burden he would prefer to receive none of, rather than too much of. In return, she is humiliated that her devotions are similar to a beggar’s (759). The cycle of contempt perpetuates as “each one blames the other for the unhappiness,” instead of recognizing that they are both victims of the other and themselves (756). In attempts to dominate the other, they imprison each other in misery until the love no longer exists. The man succeeds, in the sense that he remains himself because he never abandoned himself completely (707). The woman is nothing without his love, thus “she takes refuge in delirious imaginings as in former times in the convent; or if she is too reasonable, there is nothing left but to die” (705). Her existence after love amounts to a lie or death. If she chooses the latter, the attempt at suicide would be a mere protest against her condition. Since more men actually put an end to their lives, de Beauvoir claims that women settle at play acting suicide, thus never actually escaping (649). The attempt to live after the death of love proves itself nearly impossible for women: their lives become a fallacy of existence.

De Beauvoir offers an alternative, real escape from interminable resentment for both men and women. She claims that if women could also exist essentially for themselves the dependence would no longer exist. To achieve this, de Beauvoir posits that men and women should be raised as equals. If a little girl has the same responsibilities and freedom as her brother and is surrounded by equality, no superiority or inferiority complex would exist (762). If she could take the same actions, risks, and ventures, she would have the same confidence to interact with the

world (345). Granting a woman control over her life implies economic independence and the ability to project herself towards her ends. In doing so, she learns how to assume responsibilities and transcends through productivity and action (764, 721). By making women autonomous subjects, they can define their Selves apart from men and love, freeing men from their condition and love from its negativity. In order to achieve an unprejudiced society, both genders must go “beyond their natural differentiations [and] unequivocally affirm their brotherhood” (766). Thus, if humans can embrace their commonalities and extend autonomy to all genders, equality will arise and the Otherness of women would be void.

De Beauvoir's ideologies directly translate to her literature. In *The Mandarins*, Nadine Dubreuilh illustrates the anguish of being a woman in an unequal society. The gender imbalance is made clear when Anne and Robert, Nadine's parents, are discussing her habit of sleeping around. Robert insists that Nadine is just doing what he did at that age, thus the action should not be shocking. Anne, however, acknowledges that sex is not the same for women, and when Nadine sleeps around it is because “she doesn't feel she's alive when she's alone” (*The Mandarins*, 73). Nadine's need for men to feel alive highlights how she also defines her existence in relation to men. The distinction between genders is further emphasized in Nadine's relationship with Lambert. Anne observes that Nadine is envious of Lambert's motorcycle and attempts to embrace it from afar by decorating and painting it. Despite this, “the motorcycle remained in her eyes the symbol of all masculine pleasures which she wasn't the source and in which, to make matters worse, she was unable to share” (369). Nadine, unsatisfied with her position as a woman and the deprivation of freedom, takes the motorcycle without warning or permission and comes back laughing. Lambert receives her with a slap, they exchange hurtful words, and their love dissolves into nothingness. This not only depicts how contempt damages

relationships but, more importantly, her inability to genuinely escape her feminine position. At the end of the novel, Nadine is both a wife and mother, despite having never expressed a maternal desire (530). Relative to her aforementioned struggle with femininity, this conclusion leaves open the interpretation that this does not satisfy her previous desire for freedom.

The Mandarins also offers the epitome of the woman in love, Paula Mareuil. From the very first chapter, it is made clear that her lover, Henri Perron, no longer loves her. Her awareness of this is acknowledged by nearly every character except herself because without admission it means nothing (29). Depicting the woman who lives a lie after losing love, Paula questions whether one can bring back the past, demonstrating that she would rather “deny the existence of space and time than to admit that love might not be eternal” (36). Blind to Henri’s pleas for her to gain independence through singing, she claims that he requires all of her since “a great love doesn’t leave a woman free for anything else” (192). She goes so far as to claim that loving Henri is her vocation and the only thing that matters to her (88, 129). Although she acknowledges that Henri views love differently than her, she declares that they are fundamentally “one single being” (192). This demonstrates how her existence is dependent on their relationship, while she simultaneously acknowledges the regret that “its success doesn’t depend on [her] alone” (192). Her lack of Self outside of their love explains the pressure to revive their relationship and the rapid decline of her mental state. As Henri distances himself from her, with both space and other women, Paula begins to lose her mind. She makes delusional claims, like Anne sleeping with Henri, shows signs of suicidal thoughts by obtaining a vial of acid, and questions how she can continue to live (445). After getting professional help, she makes futile changes: different outfits, picking up writing- Henri’s profession-, and new claims such as “no man deserves the adoration they demand of us” (525). Though her character is rarely mentioned

in the end, readers can predict that these changes have no real impact on her life. Anne encapsulates Paula's fruitless existence by stating that Paula would struggle to sincerely "play the part of a normal woman until the day she died" (522). From an outsider's perspective, this was her inevitable demise- for if she is not in love, she is nothing (*The Second Sex*, 704)

Anne portrays a more nuanced version of the woman in love. She is initially distinguishable because she has a profession, psychoanalysis. The other women constantly reference her career in both disdain and awe. They believe that their husband demands all of their time, making the possibility of something outside of him impossible and that this is only natural (*The Mandarins*, 198). Following their remarks, Anne establishes that she is nothing more than Robert's wife, which does not give her the means to monopolize him (199). Furthermore, she repeatedly states throughout the novel that "love isn't everything" (439). This highlights the contrasting perspectives on love between Paula, the woman in love, and Anne, the autonomous woman. However, their differences significantly decrease after Anne meets Lewis on a trip to America. Anne loses her Self to their relationship, claiming that "a man's desire transformed [her] into a miracle of perfection" (342). As they fall in love, Lewis asks her to stay in America and she declines by restating that there is more to life than love (462). Despite her words, Anne's shift to a woman in love is made clear as she watches Paula lose her mind, claiming that "she'd be like *myself*, like millions of other women: a woman waiting to die, no longer knowing why she was living" (447). Anne hypocritically becomes the stereotypical woman in love, an inessential object, nonexistent outside of her lover or relationship. The tone abruptly shifts once she goes back to America and "rediscovers [herself] in the body of a woman in love, a woman loved" (447). Her happiness is now intertwined with the man's being, evident as their relationship turns sour when Lewis admits to no longer love her. Anne agonizes over her

loss, which includes the end of the relationship and her Self; she is unable to think of anything else. She claims that the body Lewis had given her no longer exists, and cannot be revived (537). Back in Paris, she perceives that nobody needs her the way Lewis did and that nothing could make up for his absence (562). Her fixation on the agony leads to the contemplation of suicide, depicting the reasonable woman who contemplates death after losing love. In the end, she decides to not drink the acid and continue living, just like Paula (610). Her aforementioned claims that life is more than love become obsolete as she questions who or what she will continue to live for now that the love is gone- for if she is not in love, she is nothing (*The Second Sex*, 704).

De Beauvoir's literature, isolated from her other texts, may lead readers to conclude that there is no desirable outcome for women in their relationships. Her characters exhibit the negativity of being a woman with rare positive elements. Nadine embodies defeatism when she surrenders to her destiny as a wife and mother. She was introduced as a relentless, argumentative girl who refused to take on the role society, her lovers, and family encouraged her to: submissive, sweet, and proper. Her resort to marry a man and have a child seems to betray her initial character, especially since she showed no interest in these affairs previously. Though her marriage appears benign, she shows little genuine affection towards her child or any one (570). This leads me to believe that her future was not a willing, eager decision and because of this she is not the happiest she could have been. Instead, she merely grew tired of fighting her condition and demonstrates the reluctant, unsatisfying conclusion most women succumb to as wives and mothers: there is no way to escape the feminine destiny. It is disappointing that the opportunity to resolve the gender imbalance by giving Nadine freedom was not taken. Perhaps this illustrates how women cannot go beyond their limitations since the inequality is not reconciled.

In a more explicitly pessimist light, readers may also interpret that being in love directly corresponds to losing your mind. Paula perfectly symbolizes the neuroticism that arises after losing love in a relationship. Her madness was predictable because she tied her existence to Henri and never defined herself outside of him, thus she was nothing without him. The representation of the woman in love is necessary to translate de Beauvoir's conception of it into a tangible character. However, it is Paula's inability to overcome this conviction and recuperate her Self afterward that causes me to regard her as an insufficient representation of a woman. Though I understand that her nonexistence after love necessarily follows the ontology in *the Second Sex*, I refuse to accept that this is the only possible outcome for women. Why *must* her existence be obsolete? After receiving support from Anne and doctors, why couldn't Paula begin singing, meet new people, and move on with her life? Henri is given the opportunity to start anew with a baby, wife, and magazine, so why does de Beauvoir decline to extend the same resolution to Paula? Again, perhaps this establishes how women cannot escape their shackles unless an equal society is constructed. Yet, this ideology fails to convince me; Paula deserves the opportunity for redemption as Nadine deserves freedom.

The most frustrating assumption readers may produce from the literature is the belief that no matter how hard a woman tries to go beyond her limitations, she will always fail. Anne was made to succeed; she has a job, healthy priorities, and a stable relationship. De Beauvoir's choice to posit Anne as the woman in love, making her susceptible to insanity and suicide, was an unnecessary narrative. Once Anne falls in love she becomes a hypocrite by disregarding her own advice and losing her values. Why did falling in love have to ruin Anne? She gives the impression of a reasonable woman and had no reason to contradict herself, other than what seems to be confirmation bias for de Beauvoir's ideology. Anne witnessed Paula's undoing, yet

still repeated the same mistake. If Anne had retained her sanity, she could have dealt with the agony of losing love in a positive way. Instead of turning it to despair, she could have acknowledged her need for more love by asking Robert to revive their passion or begin looking for another affair. She could have also overcome by focusing on psychoanalysis and finding comfort through helping others cope. Again, it was futile to absolve her into nothingness, losing her initial potential.

De Beauvoir misleads readers into believing that good, healthy love is intangible when it was right in front of Anne. Why did Anne have to fall in love with Lewis? Why couldn't Anne either be satisfied with Robert or revive their passion? Why was their stable relationship not enough? An explanation can be found if we look at alternative demonstrations of relationships in the media, specifically the TV show *Friends*. Monica Geller and Chandler Bing have a loving, unproblematic relationship, signifying that healthy love can exist. They are portrayed, however, as boring in relation to Ross Geller and Rachel Green's relationship, which is riddled with arguments and distrust. The media and audience focus on the latter relationship since drama is more captivating than peace. Yet, prioritizing the unhealthy relationship does not mean the good alternative is less important or nonexistent. It is understandable that bringing in Lewis created more content for de Beauvoir- as in her real life- but it is not the dogmatic representation of love. It is unfair for de Beauvoir to limit love as negative by representing no positive alternative, when in fact, healthy love is preferable and tangible.

De Beauvoir also offers no literary execution of the escape laid out in *the Second Sex*, this begs the question: Is her escape even possible? The call to establish equality and treat others as equal is admirable but gives no immediate means of action. We cannot simply reconstruct our society, evident through years of pleading and revolutions with little honest change. Further,

stating that women must be bestowed autonomy implies that men are primarily responsible for achieving equality. This not only dispossesses women of freedom but renders them powerless at the hands of men. Asking women to wait for their oppressors to stop oppressing them is not an authentic action or an efficient means to liberation. It is ironic and illogical that the feminine escape depends on men when it should instead be plausible within their means. The escape de Beauvoir calls for is overcomplicated and unattainable, which explains why her characters are bound to their conditions.

However, this does not render escape as a facade. De Beauvoir rightfully identifies the source of subordination and perpetual anguish: women did not have the means to define and exist essentially for themselves. In our contemporary society women have the opportunity to achieve economic independence, take risks, and venture out to the same extent as men; thus, the failures that arise from love are drawn less from the gender imbalance in autonomy. Rather, both men and women must take responsibility for confining themselves and their partner to a negative love with cyclical patterns of contempt.

Bibliography

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