

Why We Should (Still) Read Beauvoir
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I want to thank you all for coming tonight and the Graduate Institute for hosting this lecture, and to say a little bit about why I wanted to give this lecture. Long, long ago, I was a GI student here over the course of four summers, and I recall with great fondness the Wednesday night lectures, talks, and roundtable discussions we had then, though they were perhaps less formally instituted than they have been of late. My paper is aligned with the spirit of those exploratory and informal events and the discussions that followed them.

I also want to say something about why I am lecturing on Beauvoir. I was lucky enough to offer a preceptorial on Beauvoir this past academic year and so I was given the gift of reading this incredible book with 10 of the most thoughtful, invested, and interesting students one could wish for as interlocutors. It was actually reading their preceptorial papers that inspired me to write on Beauvoir and so I owe them a great amount of gratitude.

I wrote this talk expecting that one need not have read Beauvoir to understand what I am saying: this is a paper on a non-program book and a book that is not necessarily a part of our common discourse (yet). One of the aims of this talk, then, is to introduce you to the book and perhaps to persuade you that *The Second Sex* is worth reading, is still relevant, and that it raises important questions we might not otherwise ask.

My claim, however, is more specific than a general sense of the relevance of *The Second Sex*. I also have found this book to be paradigmatic of a way of thinking—perhaps of learning—that we aim for at this college. That is, *The Second Sex* could be read as exemplifying characteristics that we take to be essential to an education in the liberal arts. To this end, I suggest the following:

1. Beauvoir's book is motivated by a question— 'What is woman?'. One might call this her opening question. We like opening questions, here. We particularly like opening questions that require us to consider something we might take as a given, something we think we understand or know, questions which help demonstrate – in particular through prolonged discussion—that we don't actually know what we thought we knew. When Beauvoir offers her famous premise that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (283, which is almost precisely half way through the book, at the beginning of the second volume) we might read this as an elaboration of the question rather than any kind of answer-- the kind of elaboration we might offer in the second half of a seminar to show that there is more complexity and depth yet to be uncovered. I wonder how often we ask exactly who is included or meant to be included when an author or text refers to 'humanity' or 'mankind'. *The Second Sex* helps us to investigate this question, and it seems worth our exploring together, even if we don't agree on the answers. If agreement or assent/consensus were the aim of seminar discussions, seminars would truly never end.

2. Beauvoir's aim is freedom, and that freedom can only be extended to women by uncovering and revealing the limiting and determining features of women's lived experiences. When the New Program began in 1937, the motto of SJC was selected as a play on the Latin word for "book" (liber) — "Facio Liberos Ex Liberis Libris Libraque", "I Make Free Adults from Children by Means of Books and a Balance."¹ We, like Beauvoir, seem committed to the premise that learning can lead to freedom, and, furthermore, that an understanding-- or at least a profound engagement with-- history, literature, philosophy, theology, science, mathematics and art can be liberating. That we question, probe and interrogate our previously held assumptions and opinions about the world is a condition of free and thoughtful action. If we hold assumptions and opinions about what 'woman' is, or what 'feminine' is, then the freedom of women depends upon exploring our understanding of woman through questions, investigation, and dialogue. That the term or idea 'man' can stand in for or represent humanity as a universal (humankind, mankind) --even in our college motto-- risks enfolding women into an absolute model of human freedom that does not adequately recognize differences in the experiences of women. As Beauvoir puts it, "just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical that defined the oblique, there is an absolute human type that is masculine" (5).

¹ I will note that this translation of the motto is the one circulated in a 2014 letter to the community written by Barbara Goyette and Victoria Mora, one or both of whom I assume offered the translation. The college's Wikipedia page translates the motto retaining the masculine universal—I make free *men*.... (following the lecture, I changed the college Wikipedia page to the Goyette/Mora translation).

3. Beauvoir is concerned with how we live together. Beauvoir envisions a subject who thinks freely and authentically and who actively engages in human projects and relations. Such a subject ought to be a consciousness engaged in a reciprocal movement with other subjects, positing itself as Subject yet recognizing its possibility to be objectified when confronted by Others. Only such a subject can fully take its part, she says, in the human 'mitsein' (being-with). The plurality of conditions determines and differentiates the experiences by which one becomes-- or fails to become-- such a subject, and, insofar as one fails to engage in such a reciprocal movement, insofar as one is relegated to the position of Other, one will fail both to live and to act freely. This failure is not only problem for women, it is a human problem--one that spreads itself through all communities, from the familial to the global.

These claims—that the text is motivated by a question, that it aims at human freedom, and that such freedom is necessary for human communities—serve as the background for the talk, though I am going to focus more specifically on a passage from the introduction. Originally, I had intended to explicate five themes and terms offered in this passage, but that would be far too long a lecture, as it turns out, and so I have chosen two words that I hope will provide you with some sense of what I find interesting and important in *The Second Sex*. (Here is the passage:)

“What singularly defines the **situation** of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous **freedom**, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as *Other*: an attempt is made to freeze her as an *object* and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness. Woman’s *drama* lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always *posits* itself as essential, and the demands of a **situation** that *constitutes* her as inessential.” (Introduction, 17)

I am going to focus on Situation and Freedom, and while I will discuss each of them in turn, it will quickly become clear how they implicate one another.

Situation

Beauvoir’s first use of the word situation appears in the opening paragraph of the introduction, where we find the term italicized in the following claim: “But conceptualism has lost ground: biological and social sciences no longer believe there are immutably determined entities that define given characteristics...science considers characteristics as secondary reactions to a situation (*une situation*)”. A few paragraphs later she draws the following contrast: it would never, Beauvoir writes, occur to a man to write a book on the singular situation of males in humanity (5). This is not to say that there is no situation for men, but that the situation for men is a given; it is granted as the universal situation, and to ask “what is a man?” is tantamount to asking “what is a human being?” We might here apply one of

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's two rules of feminism and ask whether this kind of generalizing is reversible. That is, could we reverse the claim and put women in as the universal? Could the question "what is a woman?" be taken to mean "what is a human being?" My intuition is that we would not make this reversal so easily. If we juxtapose claims about humanity in general-- that is, the situation for human beings or the human condition-- with claims about woman or woman's condition, we might find enough disparity to recognize that to be human in this general sense and to be a woman do not amount to the same thing. When Beauvoir writes of the *situation of woman* she means one that places her in a secondary position within the human situation, within the *mitsein*. If we can better understand what she means by situation, we might better comprehend what Beauvoir means when she writes that characteristics-- the characteristics of a woman -- might be defined by a situation, that is, by a situation rather than nature, biology, or some mysterious feminine essence.

First, I think it helpful to look to the structure of the book as a whole. The book is divided into two volumes (1: *Facts and Myths* and 2: *Lived Experience*) and each volume is sub-divided into parts and then chapters within the parts. Volume II, Part II is entitled "Situation" but it also contains a chapter (10) entitled "Woman's Situation and Character". We should not be misled by the way Beauvoir appears to narrow her use of 'situation' to one part of the book. On my reading, the entirety of *The Second Sex* reveals the situation as a whole, and the construction of the book demonstrates the reciprocal nature of the relations between the facts and myths and

the lived experiences, all of which together constitute the situation for women. What we find in Volume II, Part II as in particular identified as 'Situation' are the concrete and typical situations that both result from and contribute to the destiny, history and myths of Volume I.

To give an example, one of the concrete situations in the part Beauvoir calls "Situation" is "The Mother". Beauvoir's account of "The Mother" (which is a chapter) relies on the biological data, the psycho-analytic account, the historical record, the myths, the economic reality, the childhood, the girlhood, the sexual initiation, the marriage (and likely much more) to demonstrate how these facts and myths as well as one's own personal history are concretized into a presently lived experience, the experience of being a mother. For a woman to explicitly and simply think that she wants to be a mother because she likes children or because she assumes this role will bring her happiness, is to ignore the plurality of forces at play on and through her. There may be a biological impetus to perpetuate the species that has demands on the woman, but, as Beauvoir writes, "the woman's body is one of the essential elements of the situation she occupies in this world, but her body is not enough to define her; biology alone cannot provide an answer to the question that concerns us" (48). Following Beauvoir, from the biology we should next look to the psycho-analytic, economic, historical and political contributions to the situation. For the specific situation of "The Mother," these issues might take the form of some of the following: the availability of birth control and/or abortion, which directly influence a woman's choice to become a mother; these concerns about women's healthcare will overlap-- sometimes in conflicting ways-- with questions of economics. How one

was raised might play a role--does being handed dolls to play with encourage maternity? The question of what other choices and activities are open to a woman, and whether those options seem or are made to seem better or worse, is of course relevant here. Could 'mothering' be an active human project-- a praxis-- that allows someone to eschew other kinds of work? Can being a mother justify and provide meaning to an existence that risks looking passive and aimed at repetition rather than progress? Beauvoir thinks not, or, minimally, thinks that such justification or meaning-giving is largely inauthentic, that is, it does not arise from a recognition of one's freedom. The decision or situation in which one becomes or doesn't become a mother is part of the intricate web that constitutes women's lives. If we feel ourselves inclined to think that motherhood is in and of itself fulfilling, respected, and freely chosen, we should ask ourselves how many women have chosen motherhood outside of a lasting partnership-- likely or historically a marriage. The connection of the mother to marriage is more explicit than to other factors, but they all play a role in more or less explicit ways.

At the same time, the lived experiences of women as mothers become the grist for the mills of the myths and facts, that is, scientific fact, historical record, theology and literature as it pertains to women. So long as women feel it is their biological, essential and social destiny to be mothers, being a mother will continue to be the biological, essential and social goal to be attained.

What I mean to suggest with the abbreviated example of The Mother is that the particular situations in which women live-- as married women, as mothers, as independent women are not free choices, but largely determined choices, choices

affected and influenced not merely by the options available to any specific woman, but by the way a woman takes on and lives, or assumes, the biology, history, psychology and mythology that capture her. Rather than our choices (to marry, to become a mother, to be an independent woman) representing an entirely rational deliberation leading to free selection, Beauvoir maintains that such decisions are (in the best circumstances) only “chosen in situation”, that is “both motivated and freely chosen”. Of any choice a woman makes concerning how to live as a woman, nothing in the mythology and facts is “determining, although all contribute to explaining it” (436). The options for women are situated choices, choices weighted with a politics, literature, economy, biology and psychology that have historically tended towards the oppression rather than the liberation of women.

The situation, then, is this plurality of contributing circumstances constituted both by external and internalized forces on an originally free consciousness. The situation is both the present as lived by women and the entire history that weighs upon that present. It is biological facts that claim as conclusions premises that went unrecognized in its descriptive method; it is a body of literature that varies wildly in its portrayals of women is still largely written from the male perspective. At the individual level it is being raised as a girl, but it is also attempting to raise a girl as if she were a boy. It is an experience of one’s own body as alienation, mystery, and interiority. It is, as our opening citation tells us, to be constantly put into the position of other-- or, as my students started saying, to be othered -- by men, by women, by ourselves-- to be othered and yet to intuit one’s subjectivity. The situation is not singular but is rather a convergence of lived, discursive and implicit

conditions that crystallize in each particular woman. Whether she accepts or rejects the conditions, she is always responsive to them. Even rejecting the notion of woman is to be in some way captured by it, haunted by it even as one enacts its negation.

We might recognize that many of the fields which comprise the facts and myths (science, politics, literature, philosophy, theology—Beauvoir even references Ptolemy in one place in the book) bear great resemblance to the arts we study as part of a liberal education, but the way they converge in the situation is not automatically liberating.² Its multifacetedness does not immediately nor easily yield escape-- in fact, we might better see it as an attack on all fronts. The situation is synthetic insofar as it brings together what might appear as discrete considerations, but that it synthesizes them into the lived experiences of women means that women always locate themselves within a vast field of influences, many or most of which serve to objectify and oppress her, to fix her in immanence. Beauvoir shows how systemically the situation operates by pointing out that, historically, when one area shows improvement, another area becomes more constraining. After she evaluates the situation of women in the ancient world, Beauvoir points out that in Rome, when women had great freedom in their personal lives they were afforded only limited legal rights but just as women were offered some legal emancipation, their personal lives came under far greater scrutiny. This is when we find that the satirists “went

² Addressing why women have not produced the depth and scope of work that men in these fields that men have, Beauvoir notes “Women do not challenge the human condition because they have barely begun to assume it entirely...Art, literature and philosophy are attempts to found the world anew on a human freedom: that of the creator; to foster such an aim one must first unequivocally posit oneself as freedom” (748).

wild against them” for behaving like men in their personal and political lives. Thus, an abstract equality, especially equality before the law, was wholly insufficient to change the situation.³ The danger particular to an oppressive situation is that it is systematic, self correcting and self perpetuating.⁴

Though Beauvoir occasionally suggests a sort of hopefulness about changing the situation, because the situation is so convoluted in its causality, it both results from and in the alienation of women within the human species.⁵ Complicating matters is the fact that while other oppressed groups have united in some way against their oppressors, “women lack the concrete means to organize themselves into a unit that could posit itself in opposition...[women] do not use ‘we’ ...but remain tied to certain men—fathers or husbands—more closely than to other women” (8). Sexual liberation, autonomy over her reproductive capacities, a body of literature that better reflects women’s interests and realities, love that looks more like friendship than marriage, are a few of the steps Beauvoir suggests towards changing the situation. Perhaps too reliant on the promise of socialism, Beauvoir emphasizes throughout, however, that economic liberation and work is the *sine qua non* of a new and free situation for woman.⁶ Most importantly, however, no single aspect of the situation could constitute sufficient liberation.

³ “In their exchanges, woman counts on the abstract equality she was guaranteed, man on the concrete inequality he observes” (758).

⁴ Beauvoir denies that history is cyclical, if only because she is committed to the idea that “freedom can break the circle” (763).

⁵ A species which is, Beauvoir reminds us in the conclusion, not so much a species as “an historical becoming, defined by the way it assumes natural facticity” (753).

⁶ I say the promise of socialism because Beauvoir notes that this is what the Soviet revolution promised but failed to deliver: “women raised and educated exactly like men would work under the same conditions and for the same salaries...women would be obliged to provide another livelihood for themselves; marriage would be based on a free engagement that the spouses could break when

Freedom

This brings us to the next word from our opening passage: freedom. Beauvoir contrasts freedom in numerous places (notably the introduction) with happiness, and it is worth our time to think about why. Beauvoir rejects happiness as a goal or an aim – happiness is an ambiguous notion and authenticity-- that is, recognition of ourselves as free subjects-- would certainly be required before one could tackle the question of happiness. “Is not a housewife happier than a woman worker” she asks rhetorically? Her answer is neither yes nor no, but that, “we cannot really know what the word happiness means and still less what authentic values it covers; there is no way to measure the happiness of others, and it is always easy to call a situation that one would like to impose on others happy: in particular, we declare happy those condemned to stagnation under the pretext that happiness is immobility” (16).

Happiness seems like such a clear aim-- even a *telos*-- for humans-- we think so often that we are striving towards happiness. But given the wide range of human activities, emotions and relations that we associate with happiness, could we possibly know what it means to call something ‘human happiness’? More importantly, how can I know that I have authentically chosen my variety of happiness? Happiness is not a definitive term; perhaps in a seminar you have considered the question ‘What is happiness?’. For Beauvoir, the happiness of the

they wanted to; motherhood would be freely chosen—that is, birth control and abortion would be allowed—and in return all mothers and their children would be given the same rights; maternity leave would be paid for by a society that would have responsibility for the children, which does not mean that they would be taken from their parents but that they would not be abandoned to them” (760). See also p. 761.

bourgeois woman, for example, is, if not wholly illusory, greatly conditioned by her situation. "How could the Cinderella myth not retain its validity?" Beauvoir asks, and then elucidates, "Everything still encourages the girl to expect fortune and happiness from a "Prince Charming" instead of attempting the difficult and uncertain conquest alone" (155). She thus opposes the difficulties of authentic freedom with the ease of accepting a constrained happiness. Choosing the happiness of the bourgeois housewife allows a woman to "elude the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help" (10). The myth of domestic, immanent, repetitive happiness makes it easier for the woman to give in to what she calls the 'temptation to flee freedom' and, she concludes, 'it is an easy path.' Women are not simply condemned to this happiness but complicit in selecting it, "seduced by the ease of their condition, they will accept the role of housewife and mother to which they are being confined... It is easier," Beauvoir writes, quoting George Bernard Shaw, "to put people in chains than to remove them when the chains bring prestige" (130).

Indeed, why remove the chains at all? Perhaps there are some women who are content to go through life enchanted or enchained but happy (a common idiom puts this more succinctly). We need not look much further than our program texts to think about where this alleged domestic happiness leaves us: when Dorothea achieves just the marriage she wanted, we next find her sobbing in a hotel room on her honeymoon. Eve is tempted by the fruit in spite of ideal companionship in Paradise; Penelope, on her own for the better part of her married life, labors in vain

in her room only to undo what she produces each day, Clytemnestra, Antigone. How great is their happiness? Lady Macbeth?

One problem with inauthentic happiness, happiness selected in a determined and limited field, is that it will always be tenuous at best, always at risk of fracturing, of falling apart, of recognizing the restrictions as such. In her novel, *My Brilliant Friend*, Elena Ferrante describes such a realization through Lila, who calls it a dissolving of margins. “But suddenly-she told me- in spite of the cold she had begun to sweat. It seemed to her that everyone was shouting too loudly and moving too quickly. This sensation was accompanied by nausea, and she had the impression that something absolutely material, which had been present around her and around everyone and everything forever, but imperceptible, was breaking down the outlines of persons and things and revealing itself” (89-90). Lila’s horror, her repulsion and her disassociation in this scene sound much like an impotent version of what Sarah Ahmed refers to as ‘snapping’, an experience that forms the foundation for what she calls Snap Feminism. She writes:

It is only when you seem to lose it, when you shout, swear, spill, that you have their attention. And then you become a spectacle. And what you brought out means you have to get out. When we think of such moments of snap, those moments when you can’t take it anymore, when you just can’t take it anymore, we are thinking about worlds; how worlds are organised to enable some to breathe, how they leave less room for others.

Eve, Dorothea, Penelope, Antigone, Clytemnestra, Lady Macbeth, Donna Anna. Don’t we see them experience their moments of snap, the instant when the happiness they were promised proves highly illusory, when the margins begin to dissolve?

Even if it could be authentic, happiness is a complex matter to elucidate and risks so much relativism. Beauvoir does not deny that happiness may have a part in the future she envisions for women, and for human community, but the happiness that results from genuine freedom is secondary to it and largely unknowable at the present time.⁷ For Beauvoir, happiness is not merely a difficult, but a dangerous, end to work for, insofar as the ideal of happiness has been used as a tool of oppression. Thus she elects not happiness, but freedom as the goal. Here at the college we talk about human flourishing. If freedom and happiness are not the same thing, it seems to me that Beauvoir would put flourishing on the side of freedom.

So what does Beauvoir mean by freedom, and why ought we aspire to it? Beauvoir says, in contrast to happiness, that the position she holds is that of 'existentialist morality'. We might better turn towards her work in the *Ethics of Ambiguity*, written two years before *The Second Sex*, to recognize that Beauvoir does not here intend a general or borrowed notion of existentialist morality, but one that she herself has defined and described. Beauvoir's existentialism is at once committed to the possibility of human transcendence while fully aware of the limits of facticity, or, as we described it above, the situation. Her ethics, then, is accomplished through struggle and some reconciliation of a radical ideal of freedom with a real possibility for it. In a general sense, existentialism conceives of human subjectivity as wholly or almost entirely transcendent, able to overcome the immanence of being through an ability to project itself into the future, and to alter

⁷ "...this does not mean that love, happiness, poetry and dreams will be banished from [the world of tomorrow]. Let us beware lest our lack of imagination impoverish the future; the future is only an abstraction for us..." (765)

and affect the world through productivity and praxis. "Every subject," Beauvoir explains, "posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms" (16). That transcendence is accomplished through a surpassing of what is given (that is, given by the materiality in the world, given by relations with others, with society, given by one's own past and even one's present)-- this notion surpassing is typical of existentialist theory; what Beauvoir adds to this (and perhaps what makes it a morality or an ethics) is the surpassing not only towards the future but towards other freedoms, that is, other subjects.

Let me be more concrete: I used to terrify undergraduate students (not here) when we studied existentialism by getting them to see that there was really nothing-- no genuine constraint or limitation-- keeping them in the classroom, holding that they remain students pursuing a college degree. I would likewise upset them when I suggested that there was also nothing-- no essential identity or nature-- that assured that I would continue to be a teacher, a runner, a wife, or a mother. Nothing except my own choices and the way that I that I assume decisions made in my past as an identity or my essential character; only these things can serve as any kind of guarantee for the future. I will continue to be a teacher, to do what is expected of the teacher as long as I see value in it and regard my identity as bound to that role-- and only for so long. Because I create my own essence or identity rather than being born into it, I can also undo it. Because I create values, they are at constant risk of reevaluation. This kind of transcendence is a radical and terrifying view of freedom.

But Beauvoir thinks that there are some limitations on this otherwise unrestricted human freedom. The first is that if I genuinely recognize my own freedom and other subjects as like-me, I will also aim for their freedom. Furthermore, Beauvoir recognizes the implications of the situation on this freedom. That is to say, sometimes our situation, particularly when the situation is comprised of systematic oppression-- the situation of a slave, a proletariat, a woman, a person born into poverty-- sometimes a situation such as these has closed too many paths, has restricted the possibilities too greatly to allow for such freedom. This limiting is likely a direct result of the failure of one subject or group of subjects, positing itself as free, to fail to extend that freedom to others.

Beauvoir's ideal of freedom attempts to include some commitment to others-- though such commitments risks immanence-- while attempting to maintain the possibility of transcendence. "But what is true of friendship," she writes, "is true of physical love: for friendship to be authentic it must first be free. Freedom does not mean whim (*caprice*): a feeling is a commitment that goes beyond the instant; but it is up to the individual alone to compare her general will to her personal behavior so as either to uphold her decision or, on the contrary, to break it; feeling is free when it does not depend on any outside command, when it is lived in sincerity without fear"(511).⁸ Only a commitment which actively and reflectively holds within itself the possibility of being broken can be a free commitment. Freedom, then, is not the rational recognition and pursuit of the best possibility, but entails the existence of

⁸ I have taken the liberty of altering the possessive adjectives from the masculine to the feminine. In French, the possessives take their gender from the word they modify and we cannot then know that Beauvoir intended them to mean one sex rather than the other. Furthermore, I have changed the word *et* to "and" rather than "to".

many-- perhaps endless- possibilities without regard to their moral value beyond the free recognition of them precisely as possible, for oneself and others.

Here is the problem. This freedom may not, indeed likely will not, be easy. The radical freedom posited by existentialism is terrifying insofar as it is anti-reductionist and anti-essentialist. It is common for subjects-- men and women alike-- to flee this kind of freedom, to create and hide in essential identities that define us and limit our choices. We find solace and the respite that become characterized as happiness in these identities. But for Beauvoir, being fully human-- and free in her sense of the word-- may not result in happiness, and it is certainly incompatible with the inauthentic happiness that comes with the roles or identities we essentialize ourselves into. Perhaps paradoxically, in spite of her overt commitment to freedom, Beauvoir thinks that some avenues need to be closed, some inauthentic choices revealed as such: Thus, for example, "The situation has to be changed in their common interest by prohibiting marriage as a 'career' for the woman" (523).

Given her devotion to freedom, has Beauvoir then contradicted herself by eliminating some of the choices as valid possibilities? Why can one not choose to be a housewife⁹ (home-maker, our new term which makes this task seem more active) if one recognizes it as a free choice and, even better, if one suspects she will be happy with this choice? I think Beauvoir's response is that in the current situation (hers? ours?) these are the avenues that *cannot* freely be chosen; the weight of the situation is far too oppressive and extensive in these matters, we are already caught

⁹ We might now prefer or use the term 'homemaker' for housewife, though this seems a linguistic attempt to make an active term (hence, a maker) out of someone Beauvoir sees as resigned to repetition and maintenance (of the home).

up in the situation by the time we think we can freely choose, we are choosing from within and therefore not transcending it. It is like letting the prisoner choose the color of her chains and then convincing her how happy she should be with her choice. Jane Austen might best illustrate this point: Charlotte, perhaps herself a proto-existentialist as it turns out, tells us that “happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance” (16), but Lizzie disagrees. Lizzie rejects two proposals she thinks will make her unhappy. So it looks like Lizzie makes a free choice, in the end, to marry for love and happiness, but we cannot overlook that haunting the entirety of the novel is the threat of economic disaster or social disgrace, of some future for Lizzie, her sisters, and Mrs. Bennett that is so unthinkable Austen doesn’t fully describe it for us. Yes, Lizzie chooses her marriage and yes, she thinks that it will make her happy, but it is a radically situated and highly determined choice. We cannot know what Elizabeth Bennett would have chosen in a different situation.

It is a common trope and an active topic of debate that the feminist movement-- in particular the second wave feminism inspired by *The Second Sex* is (was?) about choice. Perhaps a perfunctory reading of *The Second Sex* might confuse Beauvoir’s notion of freedom with this concept of choice—indeed, we often consider freedom and choice as equivalents--but this would be to misrepresent the morality for which Beauvoir actually advocates. Often, the options described as ‘choices’ are actually direct consequences of an oppressive situation. Furthermore, many of these so-called choices are only available to the group Beauvoir identifies as the bourgeois, but we might now think of as hetero-normative women within a comfortable socio-economic group. For so many women, for example, the ‘choice’ to

stay at home with her children is not an option. At the same time, these women are often judged by standards-- standards formed from the facts and myths of the situation-- they are judged by standards of motherhood that proclaim the *choice* to work as the completion of feminism, and at the same time subtly regard the decision to stay home as the better one. For as long as women's work is a choice, it also remains easier to underpay them-- theirs is, of course, likely to be the second income. Beauvoir's sense that the economics of the situation cannot be surpassed seems right from this perspective. So much of what we uphold as genuine choices and possibilities for women, are in fact implicit reinforcements of the status quo. Choice and freedom are not the same. It is for this reason that real freedom, Beauvoir's freedom, requires full participation in the human experience for all humans, not the choice for one group to participate or to opt out. To be optional is to remain secondary.

Conclusion

I actually find the conclusion to *The Second Sex* the most perplexing, and perhaps, disappointing part of the book, and this is both because I find Beauvoir's hopefulness perplexing and, given the time elapsed since the book was written, frustratingly sad because the claims of the book resonated so profoundly with me and with the students I studied it with this year. Perhaps to avoid writing my own perplexing and disappointing conclusion, I merely offer some questions:

If you look back at the opening passage from Beauvoir's Introduction, does it make more sense to you that woman's existence could be lived as a drama between the conflicting experiences of herself as free subjectivity and as situated objectivity?

Could you understand why a single change, such as equality before the law, is too abstract and insufficient to really change a situation constituted by systematic and multifaceted oppression and othering of women? Do you think freedom and happiness are different goals, and, if so, in which might consist human flourishing? Is it alienating to women to assume that the term and idea man can include them? Is it possible that the universal claims found in some of the books we read here might apply differently to women because of their different experiences and situation? Do you know what it is to be, or to become, woman? Could asking this question increase the liberating possibilities of a liberal arts education?

But perhaps most importantly at this moment is the question of whether you want to think more about these topics, to read a bit more from Beauvoir, and to continue the discussion I have been hoping to begin tonight.

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