

How we Define the Woman:
Simone de Beauvoir through the Lens of Frederick Engels

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HUM 103-104
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19 December 2019

“Are there even women? True, the theory of eternal feminine still has its followers; they whisper, “Even in Russia, women are still very much women;” but other well-informed people- and also at times those same ones- lament, “Woman is losing herself, woman is lost.” It is hard to know any longer if woman still exist, if they will always exist, if there should be woman at all, what place they hold in the world, what place they should hold. “Where are the women?””

-Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*¹

“Originally the duty of every woman this surrender was later performed by these priestesses alone, as representatives of all other women. With the rise of the inequality of property- already at the upper stage of barbarism, therefore- wage labor appears sporadically side by side with slave labor, and at the same time, as its necessary correlate, the professional prostitution of free woman side by side with the forced surrender of the slave.” - Frederick Engels, “The Monogamous Family”²

French feminist Simone de Beauvoir poses ideas that provoke her reader to think about the abstract concept of the female gender in her book, *The Second Sex*. In Friedrich Engels’s “The Monogamous Family,” the German philosopher discusses the history of monogamy and the role women have had with this practice. Both of these texts discuss the idea of womanhood and how society incorrectly treats and views those who identify as women. De Beauvoir poses multiple questions and observations that allow her audience to conceptualize their own ideas of what it means to be a woman, like the question, “Are there even women?” I was confused on what de

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011).

² Friedrich Engels, “The Monogamous Family,” (Hottingen-Zurich: Verlag de Schweizerischen Volksbuchhandlung, 1884).

Beauvoir meant by challenging the existence of womankind. Obviously, there are women, so what does she mean to imply by asking her question? De Beauvoir writes: “It is hard to know any longer if women still exist, if they will always exist, if there should be women at all, what place they hold in this world. ‘Where are the women?’”³ When de Beauvoir asks if women still exist, does she mean the concept of the rise of femininity itself, or the concept that women still belong in the home? By asking, “Where are the women,”⁴ is she asking where can she find a typical ‘woman’ in society? What does she mean by this? A woman who would be stuck in the home, or a woman who stands out in public? De Beauvoir wanted to break that stereotypical mold. By asking these questions, one can hope to interpret what de Beauvoir intended in their own way, and understand the many different ways one can be and identify as “a woman.”⁵

Asking such questions that provoke one’s mind to think about what it means to identify as a woman may be difficult to understand, due to the fact that society has had the same idea of what a woman should be for so long. While Engels’s passage was one that did not correspond completely with de Beauvoir’s, his words still helped me understand her interpretation. Engels states that “the duty of every woman, (should work) as representatives of all other women.”⁶ This quote illuminates the idea that women should work together to positively represent those who identifies as a woman. As their duty, females should create a society in which all those who identify as women feel comfortable in their own bodies, being a positive and active representation of the sex.⁷ For me, Engels’s quote illuminates the phrase, “Woman is losing

³ de Beauvoir, 23.

⁴ de Beauvoir, 23.

⁵ de Beauvoir, 23.

⁶ Engels, 35.

⁷ Engels, 35.

herself, woman is lost.”⁸ If women spent more time promoting other members of the sex, there would be less confinement and less of a struggle to achieve equal rights. My perception is that de Beauvoir claims that the “woman is lost” because she is not represented in society the way she wants to be. If de Beauvoir claims she is not comfortable and/or feels she does not contain the freedom to express her identity in society, how can every other woman be expected to? Every woman in society has a different perception on what it means to identify as a woman. There will never be one universal meaning or defined image of what it means to be a “woman,” so this only leaves it up for the rest of women in society to create their own image of what they want the sex to look like. Engels helps the reader answer the question, “Where are the women?” by allowing the reader to understand that women are not creatures that one can define or go try to find.⁹ There will never be a generic definition of a woman in society. However we can reach that conclusion by allowing women to “represent” themselves in their own light, and that will help society reach the conclusion that an identity is undefinable.¹⁰ Creating a stereotypical image of what a gender should be is something de Beauvoir is trying to steer her audience away from, and using Engels’s passage to back up her idea strengthens her argument.

Men seem to define the social construct of women in society, which puts women in a separate and unequal category from men, a stand alone group. This correlates to an idea that, de Beauvoir writes about later in her book, by referring to women as “the Other.”¹¹ If de Beauvoir herself is a woman and she claims to not know where the women are in society, what does this say about how society should view women? The additional idea of “the Other” ties in with her

⁸ de Beauvoir, 23.

⁹ de Beauvoir, 23.

¹⁰ Engels, 35.

¹¹ de Beauvoir, 26.

theme of the original passage I chose, by making the identity of the idea of a woman a mystery.¹² This concept of the Other helped me comprehend the theme of de Beauvoir's work because it expands on her idea that a woman should not be a biological form, but an identity.¹³ De Beauvoir is trying to convey to her readers that the idea of being a woman comes from individual beliefs, not from how it is defined by a textbook, by society, and especially not by men, which can then lead to self-esteem issues, misconceptions, and miscommunication. That is how Engels's piece aids me in understanding de Beauvoir's piece, by explaining that women should be represented in the way they want to be, not by the way man has been perceiving them for years.¹⁴

While it is impossible to correctly identify what a woman should be, the differences between the ideas that others have about the concept cause one to ponder their authority over the topic. A question that the reader needs to contextualize is: who are the authors writing these documents we are discussing? De Beauvoir is a woman who is talking about women, and Engels is a man talking about women, and each side has two perceptions on their concept of women. Engels's male view limits what the author can take away from his passage because he does not experience society's constant questioning as women do. Engels says that we get this idea based on the "supremacy of man" from where we get our idea of women, which supports yet again that men define the social constructs, when they do not necessarily contain all of the knowledge.¹⁵

Society is still trying to grasp the evolving concept that gender does not contain barriers. At the time *The Second Sex* was written, society was still struggling to conceptualize that women were just as capable as men. Women were starting to rise in social ranks by gaining the right to

¹² de Beauvoir, 26.

¹³ de Beauvoir, 26.

¹⁴ Engels, 35.

¹⁵ Engels, 33.

vote in 1919, expanding their influence in the White House (by acting as the first lady and being active in reform movements), and by being more accepted in the workforce during and after the World Wars. Since de Beauvoir's book was written after these events took place, she must have had some hope that things were changing rapidly for the better. However, women's rights were not progressing fast enough. The majority of society still believed that a woman's place was in the home and that their rise to the occasion during the war was only temporary. While the problem of gender discrimination has improved, women's inequality is sadly still prevalent in today's society. Women are still fighting for equal pay and finding an equal position in the professional workforce next to their male co-workers. Women are also dealing with the problem of sexual wellness and healthcare, with the threat of it banning abortions in all fifty states. This national right that women have had since Roe versus Wade could quickly change millions of women's lives starting now and continuing into the future. These issues only illuminate the fact that by questioning the place of women, their desired role in and outside the home, and asking what defines a woman, society still has a long way to go in finding the desired equality between the sexes.

The identity of women is one that society is still struggling to understand. Compared to the texts used in this essay, the new concept that it is perfectly acceptable for women can be different is now something that society now welcomes with open arms. Women can identify as anything they want to be, and as a modern woman in society, I am proud to announce that being a woman is part of my identity,

...and that is a modern revolution.

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