

Les Belles Images Short Guide

Les Belles Images by Simone De Beauvoir

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Characters

Laurence is the central figure through whom readers see and experience all other relationships. She is married to Jean-Charles, an architect; they have two daughters. Laurence is an advertising executive who invents slogans and designs to sell products.

The "belles images" or "pretty pictures" she creates color her view of the world around her. Even her husband and children have to conform to a beautiful image, just as she was the image of a model child for her parents.

After ten years of marriage to Jean-Charles, she feels that the physical attraction between them has seriously diminished. As a passing fancy she enters into a very casual affair with her colleague Lucien, only to leave him without regret when the latter makes demands on her time. We, the readers, learn that she had a nervous breakdown. It is intimated that she was unable to live with the knowledge of torture and atrocities committed by the French in Vietnam and Algeria. After her crisis, Laurence no longer experiences any strong emotions. The world around her is kept at bay. We are left with the impression that she goes through the motions of living, but that in fact, she remains alienated from her surroundings. Laurence alone can see through the hypocrisy of her friends and family. She refuses to share in their false values, but she is not strong enough to oppose them in order to go her own way. When her father, whom she had considered the only authentic person in her world, goes back to his wife for the sake of convenience, Laurence's illusions are shattered. This betrayal, along with the issue of her daughter's upbringing, provokes a crisis. Laurence has an attack of hysterical vomiting. After a long illness she finally arrives at a decision through which she will regain her mental stability. Although it may be too late for her to change, she decides to fight for her daughter's right to become an authentic person instead of being molded into a "beautiful image."

A secondary character is Dominique, Laurence's mother. In this motherdaughter relationship Dominique seems to be the self-centered, immature child, incapable of concern and love for others. Completely lacking authenticity, she spends her life keeping up appearances, imitating others, and worrying about her status as a career woman. She has dominated the lives of her children and that of her lover.

Dominique takes her husband back after the breakup of her love affair because, in her society, a woman defines herself through a man.

While Laurence tolerates her mother without any love or respect, she has an unusually close relationship with her father. He seems to embody all the traditional humanist values, and this sets him apart from the rest. Laurence even thinks that he possesses a secret which she has not found in her husband nor in her lover. But her illusions are beginning to dissipate when on a visit with him to Greece she realizes that he has knowledge and understanding of ancient Greek culture but is oblivious of the injustice and extreme poverty in that country. When in the end he joins Dominique's world, Laurence recognizes that he is just like everyone else.



In general de Beauvoir's characters in *Les Belles Images* remain caricatures, shallow creatures who live for material success only. The author's portrayal of them also remains limited to the surface. They are seen as stereotypes, representatives of the new social class in France, the bourgeois technocrats.



Social Concerns/Themes

In *Les Belles Images*, de Beauvoir's social concerns coincide with the themes of the novel. While *The Mandarins* (1954) portrays the intellectual milieu of postwar France, *Les Belles Images* describes the affluent bourgeois society of the 1960s. The people in the novel have glamorous positions with high incomes. Their concern is no longer focused on how to create a better and more just world, but on how best to display their wealth, how to present "beautiful images." Lifestyle becomes all important: the house in the country, the parties, the travels. Problems are banal: with whom to have an affair, what presents to give — not too expensive so as not to offend, yet expensive looking. The characters in *Les Belles Images* pursue trivia for lack of any true values.

De Beauvoir, whose own world was far removed from the social milieu she describes, surprised her readers by placing her novel in such a worldly setting; however, she found it an appropriate medium to deal with the subject of inauthenticity. Neither characters nor words are what they appear to be. Human relationships when based on inauthenticity are doomed to failure. Once the veneer is scratched off, the "pretty picture" looks tarnished.

The wife of the model couple deceives her husband with a lover, the glamorous professional woman is insecure without a lover and proves to be vindictive, the elegant lover turns brutish and violent when faced with an angry aging former mistress, and in the end the venerated father figure, the model of integrity, whose values seemed so sure, compromises his ideals by joining in the society which he does not respect.

Deceit operates on every level. The one notable exception is the protagonist's relationship with her daughters.

Laurence wants to shield her children from the realities of life because of her own protective upbringing. Through the struggle of Laurence, de Beauvoir makes the point that to bring up a child does not mean making a "pretty picture" of him. The education of children, an issue related to that of authenticity for the author, constitutes hence an important theme of *Les Belles Images*.



Techniques

Les Belles Images is de Beauvoir's shortest novel. The plot is very slight, covering a span of only a few months.

It revolves around the changing relationships between the few principal characters and Laurence, whose point of view is adopted throughout the novel.

Structurally the novel is built on the characters' various attitudes and reactions to its main themes — inauthenticity and the education of children.

These attitudes are focused and filtered through Laurence. Her resulting struggle lends drama to the narrative.

De Beauvoir uses satire to destroy the bourgeois mask of false values. The satire is contained in the protagonist's point of view and expressed in a language full of clichés. Although there is a single point of view, de Beauvoir's range of techniques is rather broad. For example, Laurence's alienation is illustrated not only in her own comments about others being "different," but also in the discrepancy between her words and thoughts which in turn reflects the conflict between reality and appearances.

There are very few descriptive passages in the novel. The characters are presented through dialogue. The opening pages are an example of de Beauvoir's skillful handling of dramatic dialogue.

Literary Precedents

With de Beauvoir's denial notwithstanding, *Les Belles Images* is said to have been influenced by the conception of the "New Novel" because of the lack of psychological substance of her characters. It is considered a cerebral work, and the reason for its being associated with the "New Novel" in the critic's mind probably stems from the detached dialogue of its first few pages that are so reminiscent of Nathalie Sarraute's writings where we often remains unsure as to the identity of the speakers. The setting of the novel has earned it comparisons with the works of Françoise Sagan whose novels share the same social setting.

Related Titles

For details on other titles, please see the Related Titles section of the analysis of *A Woman Destroyed* (1967).



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