

The Mandarins Short Guide

The Mandarins by Simone De Beauvoir

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Characters

Critics have called *The Mandarins* a roman à clef (a story based on real-life people and real-life events). Beauvoir in *Force of Circumstance* has refuted this claim while admitting that the characters are patterned after real-life persons. She mentions, for example, that the characters of both Henri Perron and Anne Dubreuilh have some traits of herself. In general it can be said that through their force of reasoning and their individual conduct, consistent with their proclaimed attitudes, and through their human frailties and suffering, Beauvoir's characters have become independent figures.

The principal characters of *The Mandarins* are Henri Perron and Anne Dubreuilh who identify themselves with reference to the third protagonist Robert Dubreuilh. The latter seems to be the center on which situations evolve, but he remains distant to the reader.

Dubreuilh is the wise leader, endowed with patience, a good sense of humor, and an unusual capacity for friendship and tolerance. He is perhaps the only figure in *The Mandarins* who seems to be overly idealized. Critics believe him to be modeled after Jean-Paul Sartre. It must be mentioned that Dubreuilh is not without flaws, for he is responsible for the eventual loss of his friend Henri's newspaper, *L'Espoir*, and for the breakup of the friendship between the two men. Henri Perron is a journalist and a writer who directs a liberal newspaper with leftist leanings. He is an idealist and, as such, is contrasted with Robert Dubreuilh, a political pragmatist who is inclined to overlook serious flaws in his Communist friends for the sake of unity among the leftist factions. While Henri Perron is admired by his fellow journalists for his integrity, he is portrayed as wavering in his sentimental attachments. Notable to make a clean break with his mistress Paule, he appears indecisive and unauthentic. His character, nevertheless, is balanced by other admirable qualities, among them his love of life which carries him through difficult situations.

It also sets him apart from the heroine Anne Dubreuilh, Robert's wife, who, as a psychiatrist, is trained to help others, but is unable to help herself. Henri's optimism is indomitable, but Anne's fears and obsessions never leave her.

After her failed love affair with Lewis Brogan, she channels her efforts toward greater professional involvement.

The duality of themes observed in *The Mandarins* is hence carried over to the characters.

Anne and Robert Dubreuilh's daughter Nadine is portrayed as a difficult adolescent. She belongs to a new generation of women, more self-centered and aggressive than her mother's. After many love affairs, Nadine grows into a mature woman who marries Henri and has a child with him. We are left with the impression that the author's original concept of her was rather negative, but that she allowed it to evolve under her pen.



The importance of the character Lewis Brogan has to do with the fact that he, as Anne's lover, affords her a more active participation in the novel.

By the same token, he allows readers to see Anne's capacity for emotion and even passion, as she struggles with her conflicting love and her inability to choose between her lover and her family. Many readers have identified Lewis Brogan with the American author Nelson Algren, to whom Beauvoir was passionately attached for many years and to whom the novel is dedicated.

The presentation of secondary characters in *The Mandarins* is flawed. They reveal themselves mostly through dialogue. Although their language conforms to their characters, they remain, nevertheless, sketchy and lifeless. One notable exception is Paule, Henri's mistress. She has given up her career as a singer to please her lover. Henri tires of her, but feels guilty about leaving her because of what she considers her sacrifice for him. By clinging to the past, by deceiving herself about her relationship with Henri, and eventually by losing control of her life, Paule serves to illustrate Beauvoir's thesis which she had expounded in *The Second Sex* that a woman must pursue her own career interests in order to transcend her immanence. Wanting to be but the appendage of man is living an unauthentic existence. Paule's fate also serves as a warning to Anne and strengthens her resolve to take on a greater professional commitment.

Beauvoir links the many characters in *The Mandarins* to the three protagonists, either by involving them in the political lives of Henri Perron and Robert Dubreuilh, or by attaching them emotionally to one of the three.



Social Concerns

Simone de Beauvoir explains in her memoir *Force of Circumstance* (1963) her intent in writing *The Mandarins*: She wanted to describe the political and intellectual climate and the lifestyles of intellectuals — "The Mandarins" — in France during the years immediately following World War II.

During the German occupation, the Resistance in France had united people of diverse political persuasions in their fight for a common cause. Once the country had been liberated, however, alliances shifted and old political conflicts resurfaced. New political movements were launched.

In *The Mandarins*, Beauvoir is concerned with the French intellectual's role in building a new postwar society.

The majority of French intellectuals at the time were leftists, and few were Communists. Conflicts arose as to whether or not to side with the capitalist United States which had been hailed as the liberator, but then was believed to want to subjugate all of Europe.

Most of the French intellectuals leaned toward an alliance with Russia, but news of Soviet forced labor camps had leaked out to their great embarrassment. It was easy to condemn the horror of Nazi concentration camps, but Russia was after all a friend and an ally. Against this background of political fermentation Beauvoir's mandarins are faced with concrete problems: How much should Henri Perron's newspaper *L'Espoir* tell its readers about Soviet concentration camps? The author raises the thorny question of political truthfulness. Within this context, Beauvoir discusses issues of financial support for the newspaper and the related question of its independence. The euphoria of the liberation has vanished.

Hard political choices must be made.

The author's male protagonists are divided on the issues and, as a result, their friendship breaks up.

The social value of literature is another concern of Beauvoir. The dilemma facing the French intellectual during the postwar years is one of commitment: To what extent is the individual writer willing to subordinate his creative talents to political and social causes? The essential question is whether literature can help the underprivileged and economically downtrodden. For the existentialist writer the implication is clear: Action can change the world and through action alone can man transcend himself.

Techniques

The Mandarins, a lengthy novel of about one thousand pages, represents a well-balanced work of two narratives with the point of view alternating regularly between the two protagonists, Anne and Henri. The duality which underlies the theme and the characters is thus also expressed in its form.

Beauvoir uses the dual narrative as a means of lending variety and flexibility to her style. Each character narrates in the style which is consistent with his personality, that of Anne being sober, matter-of-fact, but sometimes given to lyrical outbursts, while Henri's narrative is more colorful and colloquial.

The parallel narratives at times interpenetrate because their characters' lives and destinies intertwine. Beauvoir's style is casual; her dialogues are wellstructured and lively. They serve as a means of confrontation and action for her characters. The acute psychological insight which characterizes Beauvoir's later fiction is not yet present in The Mandarins.

Themes

In *The Mandarins*, Beauvoir develops two contrasting themes: that of the finitude of man with its contingent fear of aging and obsession with death as illustrated in the attitude and actions of its heroine Anne; and the opposing theme of optimism, with its inherent positive attitude geared toward action, which runs parallel throughout the novel and is embodied in the protagonist Henri Perron.

Anne's preoccupation with death begins with her loss of faith in God at age fifteen. The account reflects the author's experience as told later in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1959). It follows the same pattern, namely, a temporary relief from the metaphysical fears through the heroine's love for a man. However, the end of Anne's affair with the American writer Lewis Brogan triggers again her acute fear of aging and suffering and her painful awareness of her mortality. The obsession with death affects her relationship with others and pervades all aspects of her life. She contemplates suicide at one point, but does not carry it out because of her love for her family.

In *Force of Circumstance* the author states that in *The Mandarins* she used the theme of repetition in "the Kierkegaardian sense" to show the impasse in which the protagonists find themselves. In the case of Henri and Dubreuilh this theme can be seen in the loss of their friendship, the subsequent renewal of this friendship, unresolved differences notwithstanding, and in the heroine's case, three trips to visit her lover in America and her final return and resolve to remain with her husband, also without having overcome her fears and obsessions which had initially been her reason for taking a lover. In short, at the end of the narrative, the characters find themselves at their point of departure.

Another theme developed in *The Mandarins* is that of the privileges enjoyed by the bourgeois class to which belong "The Mandarins." This is not an isolated theme in Beauvoir's work; it is discussed in her autobiographical writings as well as in her works of fiction.

Among the minor themes explored in *The Mandarins* is the relationship between mother and daughter which reappears later in *Les Belles Images* (1966) and *A Woman Destroyed* (1967).

This theme is discussed at length in *The Second Sex* (1949) and developed in detail in Beauvoir's autobiographical writings. In *The Mandarins*, the heroine Anne, a psychiatrist, trained to help others, deploras not being able to do the same for her daughter Nadine, an ill-adjusted, rebellious nineteen-year-old. Anne blames herself for Nadine's troubles, believing that she had not known how to love her daughter. She later has to recognize that Nadine has found her own way, regardless of what she, her mother, did or failed to do.

Another minor theme in many of Beauvoir's works is woman's emotional and, often, financial dependency on a man. For a woman to give up her professional life in order to



devote herself entirely to her husband or lover and live vicariously through him, is seen as self-destructive.

Beauvoir's intent in writing *The Mandarins* had been to portray postwar France, the hopes and subsequent disillusionment of leftist intellectuals about the fact that the bourgeoisie with its privileges had emerged unscathed and stronger than ever from the debacle of World War II. Yet, Beauvoir did not produce a strictly historical novel; her personal themes and obsessions remain at the center of her fiction. Beauvoir's skillful interweaving of the public and private lives of her characters allows her to explore political themes. Henri's position as journalist and Dubreuilh's stature as politician are ideal for the purpose of introducing the themes of commitment, political compromise, party loyalty, and personal responsibility.

Literary Precedents

Written from an existentialist perspective, *The Mandarins* and *A Woman Destroyed* have been compared with another existentialist novel, Camus's *The Stranger* (1942). To some critics, Beauvoir's fictional works lack the concentration, the focus on one character, and the classical simplicity which made *The Stranger* so popular. However, like Camus's work, *The Mandarins* reflects modern man's, here woman's, conflicts and anguish. Her work also centers on social and political issues passionately debated by her intellectual contemporaries.

With *The Mandarins*, Beauvoir pursues the same line as Malraux with his fictionalized accounts of the Chinese revolution and the Spanish Civil War.

Her political acumen is somehow less astute than Malraux's. Beauvoir's emphasis on historical and social concerns justifies a comparison with the Naturalist school of nineteenth-century authors such as Victor Hugo and Emile Zola. On the other hand, an insufficient detachment from contemporary issues and events, as well as from philosophical speculation at the expense of literary refinements, works against *The Mandarins* and probably will eventually cause it to be eclipsed by its predecessors.

Related Titles

Please see separate analysis of *A Woman Destroyed*.

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