A Woman Destroyed Short Guide

A Woman Destroyed by Simone De Beauvoir

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Social Concerns/Characters

A Woman Destroyed is a collection of three short stories: "The Age of Discretion," "Monologue," and "Woman Destroyed." They share the same theme — fear of aging and loneliness, and the realization of a failed life. Each story is narrated by the woman protagonist. The focus is on the relationships which the woman has formed with her children and husband. In "The Age of Discretion" the main character is afraid that old age will diminish her creativity as a writer. She deceives herself about her relationship with her son whose life and career she has tried to dominate. When he announces that he is abandoning the career his mother had chosen for him in order to take a government position of which both parents disapprove, her life is shattered. The importance of the problem of aging meanwhile is kept in focus through the story's presentation in the form of a diary.

In "Monologue" self-deception is carried to the extreme. The "monologue" is that of an aging woman who has lost a daughter through suicide and a son through separation from her husband. In her mistaken belief that she exists in the eyes of others only if she has a family, she wants her son back. Through the monologue Beauvoir skillfully reveals step by step the selfdeception of the narrator. Not only has she driven her daughter to suicide through her tyranny and excessive possessiveness, but she is responsible as well for the loss of her husband.

"Woman Destroyed" is the longest of the three stories. It is the account of a woman whose world collapses because of her husband's desertion. Considering the love between her husband and herself too solid ever to be shaken, Monique fails to understand that nothing in life is permanent. Beauvoir describes the awakening to reality by the wife-narrator, her despair over the loss of her husband to another woman, the gradual disintegration of her life, the subsequent questioning about her relationship with her husband, her two daughters and the world. In her quest for understanding she consults her daughters whose opinions she refuses to accept. Monique also realizes that she has failed her daughters. They are not as brilliant and well-adjusted as she had believed them to be. Monique claims that her purpose in life was to create happiness for others. She now has to admit her failure. As in the first two stories of the collection, the narrator-protagonist has deceived herself.

The reader is able to infer this from Monique's diary which gives insights into the complexity of her character, revealing step by step the changes in Monique's relationship with her husband, her moments of lucidity, but mostly her self-deception. Ultimately Monique is ready to face reality and go it alone; yet readers are not sure as the story ends how she will fare.

Techniques

When reading A Woman Destroyed, it is wise to keep in mind that much of Beauvoir's life was dedicated to her philosophy and her political activism.

Consequently, many of her texts feature the existentialist anti-heroine, l'amoureuse, a woman character who abdicates her autonomy and her capacity for authentic engagement with life and others in favor of slavish attachments to other people whom she falsely thinks that she masters.

Key Questions

Since The Mandarins, Beauvoir seems to change her opinions on committed literature, apparently harboring few illusions about the actual impact an intellectual can have on society. Beauvoir was obviously very politically active, and we must assume she was active because she felt that she could make a difference. How is this reflected in her novels?

As readers, we have Beauvoir's treatise on the plight of women during the period in which she wrote her fiction.

Read The Second Sex in conjunction with the fiction to see if her theory meets up with her praxis, or if it is merely speculation without investment.

Literary Precedents

Written from an existentialist perspective, The Mandarins (1954) 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.

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.

Related Titles

She Came to Stay (1943), Beauvoir's first published work, revolves around the existentialist concept of the existence of others. The novel's epigraph by Hegel, "Every conscience seeks the death of the other," summarizes its main theme, the experience of otherness. The philosophical content of this novel at times overshadows the human dramatic interest.

She Came to Stay is the story of Pierre and Francoise who for years have lived in a harmonious, nonmarital relationship. They invite Xaviere, a girl from the provinces, to share their lives.

Xaviere wants to work in the theater.

Pierre, a director of some standing in Parisian theater circles, takes her under his wing. In the process, Pierre becomes sentimentally attracted to her, a fact which upsets his relationship with Francoise. Regardless of Francoise's efforts to be interested in Xaviere's welfare, she realizes in the end that she has fallen victim to jealousy. She also understands that she had taken for granted the inviolability of the couple which she formed with Pierre. Her awareness of Xaviere's hostility, the idea of another consciousness which she is unable to control, causes her in the end to seek "the other's" death by turning on the gas and leaving Xaviere to die.

Beauvoir's second work of fiction, The Blood of Others (1945), explores the existentialist tenet of personal responsibility and communicates the anguish that is caused by the belief that man is responsible not only for his actions, but also for his fellow human beings. The protagonist, Jean Blomart, leader of a Resistance group, feels guilty for having indirectly caused the deaths of several persons close to him. His leadership constrains him to make decisions which risk "the blood of others."

The social, political and historical dimension of the novel is developed within the framework of a love story.

The author later acknowledged in The Prime of Life (1960) that the characters lacked psychological depth and therefore never came to life. Unfortunately, the novel's abstract existential and philosophical constructions prevented it from achieving much popularity during Beauvoir's lifetime. The same holds true for Les Bouches Inutiles, Beauvoir's only play. In her memoirs, Beauvoir strongly criticizes her play, and recognizes that "my mistake was to pose a political problem in terms of abstract morality."

All Men are Mortal (1946), Beauvoir's third novel, relates the story of Fosca and Regine, told from each of the protagonists' point of view. Fosca is a man afflicted with immortality. In the novel, he traces his own story starting with his life in thirteenth-century Italy through the centuries to modern-day France. His mistress Regine, after having discovered Fosca's secret of immortality, hopes her memory will become immortal through her love for him.

While the idea of death is one of Beauvoir's constant obsessions, immortality is seen as alienating Fosca from his fellow humans. He feels that he can no longer love, seeing that all around him die while he alone is forced to go on.

For all of death's inhumanity, immortality is shown as a curse.

The themes elaborated in Beauvoir's fiction have all been expounded on the theoretical level in The Second Sex (1949). This study on the condition of women brought Beauvoir her greatest renown and had the strongest impact of all her works; at the present time, it is studied with great interest by scholars and students in the areas of philosophy, feminism and literary theory.

The two-volume essay was written in less than three years. The first part, "Facts and Myths," was published in 1949 while the second part, "Life Today," was published the following year. Upon Sartre's suggestion, Beauvoir undertook to write on the question of what it meant to her to be a woman. She had never given it much thought since being a woman had not interfered with anything in her fairly socially privileged life. Beauvoir discovered that the world was indeed a man's world, "fed by myths forged by men," myths which she discusses at great length in her treatise.

This theoretical inquiry into women's condition launches an existentialist account of woman's sexualization, and exposes patriarchal ideology in the cultural constructions of femininity. Before writing this monumental work, Beauvoir undertook extensive research in history, sociology, psychology, and physiology, all disciplines which she determined could shed light on the question. As a result, the text exposes and denounces the prevailing myths of womanhood that are perpetuated in men's literature and attacks psychoanalysis for its representation of women as lesser men who lack the phallus as well as men's full power of mind, body and spirit, and in which theory women's existence must be mediated by men in order to be fulfilled. Beauvoir also attacks Marxism for marginalizing and neglecting women's need and material history from its theory of political action.

The thesis of The Second Sex is summarized by the first line of part two: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one." Beauvoir attacks the notion of the "eternal feminine" of woman's essence. As an existentialist, Beauvoir refutes the idea of an innate or immanent feminine nature; consequently, she argues that it is cultural reasons rather than physiological ones are responsible for woman's condition as the secondary sex. Society has made woman what she is. Beauvoir traces woman's supposed inferiority to the fact that woman originally limited herself to repeating life, while man invented reasons for living which in his view were more important than bearing and nurturing life. In creating values, male activity transformed existence itself into a value.

Having researched almost everything written on the subject, Beauvoir wrote "Facts and Myths" like an academic treatise. In the second volume, she deals with "Women's Life Today" where she examines actual lived experience encompassing a wide range of topics, including discussions on female sexuality, motherhood and marriage.

Beauvoir's views are extremely liberal.

Often they are also problematically arbitrary and based on unfounded or preconceived notions. Her discussion of motherhood begins with an apology for abortion; however, marriage is seen as institutionalized prostitution. Beauvoir makes nevertheless some vitally important points in the final part of The Second Sex, "Towards Liberation."

She argues, for example, that to ensure freedom for women, voting and other civil rights are not enough. They must go hand in hand with women's economic independence. She writes perceptively on the conflicts and stresses that confront working women. Beauvoir concludes with a plea for fraternity which alone would make it possible for men and women to be equals.

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