Portraying Women as Beauvoir’s “Other”

Fictional Representation of Women and Gender

By: Angelica Selinger

Advisor: Professor Amy Oliver (College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Philosophy and Religion)

Senior Capstone – General University Honors Spring 2014

Supplement to PHIL-408 Feminist Philosophy
Abstract

An important aspect of the continued inequality between men and women and the persistence of sexist ideas is how women are perceived in society. Part of this perception comes from fictional representations of women from the perspective of creators who accept myths about the nature of women, since the power imbalance between men and women allow men’s representations of their perspectives on the world and on women to be conflated with objective truth, even though they are not more valid than women’s representations of their perspectives. Simone de Beauvoir, the influential feminist philosopher and author of *The Second Sex* described the phenomenon of men constructing the concept of woman from their own experience rather than from what women are in reality, stating that women are framed as “the Other,” while men are the self and subject. This paper uses *The Second Sex*, supplemented with some additional works, to analyze the portrayal of gender in fiction through Beauvoir’s philosophy. Stories and myths have been an extremely widespread and influential form of communication, conveying shared ideas and experiences that reveal truths about the world, and are closely linked to the concept of the Other because within the fictional universe the creator builds for his story, his perspective is indistinguishable from the truth, with no input from the people he portrays. The fact that women tend to disproportionately be portrayed as “the Other,” as constructs based on men’s perception of them, while men are portrayed as the subjects of their stories, creates flaws in the truthfulness and usefulness of fiction as a way of understanding reality.

Introduction

“Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth,” wrote Simone de Beauvoir in her 1949 book *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 143), a cornerstone of 20th century feminism. This statement is not only an insightful description of what the state of fictional representations of women has been for centuries, but also hints at the power of fictional stories to shape human beings’ ability to know and imagine the world and, in the hands of privileged groups, to define and limit what is true. The portrayal of women and gender in fiction is important and illuminating for feminist philosophy as both metaphor and mechanism of patriarchal oppression, and serves as a particularly
accessible way of understanding the concept of the dichotomy between the Self and the Other in the context of marginalized groups in society.

The continued inequality between men and women and the persistence of sexist ideas depends at least in part on how women are perceived in society. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir first voiced her theories of women’s oppression, claiming that the crux of the problem is that women are framed by men as “the Other” while men are the self and the subject. That is, men define themselves from the same perspective and place from which they perceive themselves, operating in a world that is imbued with their own point of view. Women, on the other hand, are the Other that is not self or subject, but object, because they do not define themselves; men define them. Beauvoir describes the process of constructing the “Other” as something fundamental to human consciousness and selfhood: “Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself…the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object (Beauvoir xxi).” These constructions, if insisted upon and obeyed, become societal norms. The scope of these societal norms’ role in the oppression of women is immense, but for my project, I am focusing on one aspect of them – how fictional portrayals of women tell people what women are.

Fictional representation of women is a frequently explored topic in feminist writing, and both Beauvoir and sources reliant on her philosophical concepts have made extensive analysis of it. However, while these sources are valuable and I have used a selection of them to supplement Beauvoir, they often approach the subject of sexism in fiction from the other side – using various philosophical ideas to critique specific gender-
related problems in media. In this paper, I will use Beauvoir to demonstrate that a range of gender-related problems in media arise from the still-persisting tendency to assume women are the Other as seen through the lens of the male Self, evident in the persistent portrayal of women as the object rather than the subject of any work of art or writing, the default assumption of a male audience for all works unless specifically and narrowly stated otherwise, and the pattern of defining female characters and subjects as either specifically, exclusively female, or by their relation to male characters, subjects, and audiences.

The Other

Beauvoir’s position in The Second Sex is that sexism and oppression continues despite de jure equal rights because women’s voices are silenced because of the definition of them as the Other. They are defined by men as part of the landscape men move in, as things, as not-men, as a negatively-defined lack of maleness, as a deviation and an auxiliary aspect of humanity, while men are both the positive presence and the neutral norm (Beauvoir xxi). Men are both what humans ought to resemble and what is natural for humans in general to be designated as. This phallocentric definition of humanity that marginalizes women plays a key role in constructing the negligibility, eccentricity and invisibility of women that needed to facilitate and institutionalize patriarchal oppression by privileging the male perspective and limiting the female. Both men and women presume that men’s perception of women is the full and unbiased objective truth of what women truly are because the examples that contradict this perception fly in the face of what deeply engrained societal norms insist is true.
This can be seen in several ways. Beauvoir describes the existence of women within the confines of the male point of view by noting that writers before her have described the difference between men and women as a difference in what their existence is contingent upon – “Benda…in his Rapport d’Uriel: …Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man (Beauvoir xxii).” Beauvoir explains that to men “she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is Absolute – she is the Other (Beauvoir xxii).”

Beauvoir’s description of how woman is equated with sex in this male-dominated worldview is among the most widely known aspects of the Othering of woman. There is no special link between women and sex (either the reproductive act or the biological category) that is unique or closer or more important than the link between men and sex, that would justify defining women across the board as signifying, implying and representing sex. Women signify, imply, and represent sex for men, (and in the case of sexual desirability, for heterosexual men), as bees signify pollination for a cherry blossom; and because the male perspective is set up as the perspective of the self, it is set up as the whole truth and nothing but the truth of what women are. What sex is for women, and what signifies, implies, and represents sex for woman, does not influence the definition of sex. Women’s experience of sex is what the biased, inessential, non-neutral, deviant, and non-central experience of sex is from the perspective of a group that does not and cannot represent humanity. Beauvoir writes, “…woman is defined exclusively in her relation to man…the truth that for women man is sex and carnality has never been
proclaimed because there is no one to proclaim it (Beauvoir 143).” This mechanism of sideling women’s perspectives is by no means restricted to sex, but as it is the most obvious point of difference between men and women, it is a particularly salient example and one that has a special prominence in fiction.

Stories

Construction of the Other cannot come from one single source. It emerges in the aggregate, from hundreds and thousands of reinforcing factors. But the dominant theme is perception. A subjective point of view that is accepted as the correct view defines the Other. In this way, Othering depends on fictionalization, rejecting or neglecting to ask for another people’s explanation of themselves and explaining them on one’s own terms.

In actual fictional stories, this is exceptionally easy as fiction is defined as something that is made up. Fictional representation has a unique power to create an internally consistent reality indistinguishable from the author’s perspective. In a fictional universe springs into being the moment the author tells it, and in this universe, the story’s creator is omnipotent and the creator’s perspective defines reality. The author is free to limit the type and amount of information about a person or group of people in a story to portray them in a certain way, and within the confines of the story, can define this portrayal as the truth. If the author perceives women in a certain way, and chooses to express this perception through the story, women are that perception, are embodiments of that perception, within the story in question. Fictional characters do not have autonomy of their own, so they are whatever the author says they are.

In a social vacuum, a story’s influence would be limited to whatever the author created and not extend to the real world, but stories do not exist in such a vacuum. Stories
and myths have always been a crucial form of communication, conveying ideas and experiences that reveal truths about the world from one person to another and creating shared understanding. Stories are meant to penetrate and resonate with the real world, and stories rely on millions of previous stories through centuries of tradition and categorization to be intelligible. Since stories are not all created by just one person, there is nothing wrong with the fact that an author is omnipotent in his own story, because there is a wide selection for those with varying preferences, and those who hear a story have the freedom to judge whether the story does in fact resonate with their understanding of the world. Various people with various viewpoints have an equal voice in making this determination. They can be relied upon to categorize stories that are unsatisfying or harmful as bad stories, or stories that make claims inconsistent with reality as nonsensical stories, and by doing so improve the authors’ ability to be aware of other people’s perspectives and make their intention match their product, or, being free and equal, they can create different stories as competition. The problem with stories arises when this freedom and equality does not, in fact, exist.

**Authors**

The assumption of authors as male is descriptively logical yet fundamentally nonsensical. Men have no innate ability to tell stories that woman are deficient in. However, historically and even to a lesser extent, contemporarily, male authors predominate. Most of the “great” authors throughout history, especially before the 20th century, are male. Numerically, it is far more common to see men’s names rather than women’s names in the writing and directing credits for film and television. Men are seen as having the capacity and authority to create stories whose content appeals and applies to
both men and women, while women are seen as writers of “women’s fiction.” This is something that has not changed greatly over time. In the 19th century, Mary Ann Evans adopted the male penname George Eliot to ensure her works would be taken seriously.¹

In 1997, the best-selling author by far in recent years, J.K. Rowling, was told before publishing the first installment of the *Harry Potter* series that she should not use her full first name of Joanne because boys would be less likely to read her books if they saw a woman’s name on the cover.² This ties into the perception that women are defined only by limiting criteria and being a woman is a peculiarity for a human, in Beauvoir’s words:

> In the midst of an abstract discussion it is vexing to hear a man say: “You think thus and so because you are a woman”; but I know that my only defense is to reply: “I think thus and so because it is true,” thereby removing my subjective self from the argument. It would be out of the question to reply: “And you think the contrary because you are a man,” for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong…there is an absolute human type: the masculine (Beauvoir xxi).

This is part of the problem of practically defining the author as female rather than male or gender-neutral, because works made by women are women’s works and therefore any truths they reveal about the world or shared understanding they create are not real, neutral truths but women’s bias, while the inverse is not the case for men, as books, films, and TV shows made by men are considered acceptable fare for all genders.

If there is a significant power imbalance between men and women, especially one that exists for a long time, women’s voices are silenced, unable to contribute their fair half to the conversation, and unable to dislodge what ought to be minor oversights on the

part of men due to simple lack of knowledge, but which are allowed to grow into chronic misconceptions as a communication gap grows and calcifies between women and men, with men having the power to define women – in the form of fictional characters in their stories – as they see them, thereby creating women who act within the confines of the story in ways that are incomprehensible, limited, demeaning, or otherwise alienating to the experiences of real women, while women lack the power to respond in kind.

Characters

Beauvoir analyzes the Othering power of stories created within a patriarchal society by looking at the archetypes men create to represent women. Beauvoir describes these archetypes as the result of men projecting their perspectives and desires on the silent and undermined Other. The double standard was given voice in ancient mythological understanding of the world that created and whose influence in part perpetuates what Beauvoir refers to as “the myth of the woman (Beauvoir 253),” which occurs when man establishes woman as the Other, and defines her according to his experience of women. This is not a holistic or internally consistent experience, but one that is compiled from many incompatible and contradictory myths (virgin, whore, Earth Mother, angel, child, etc.) Most women have partial similarities to multiple myths, no woman is completely personified by one myth and no myth completely describes all women or provides a satisfactory embodiment of Woman.

Men’s motivations in creating them are blinkered by societal pressures to separate themselves from women, view women as inferior, define themselves as being unlike a
woman, and to not take seriously the views of women. Coupled with the power
differential that allows men to ignore women if they so wish and to control the type and
amount of knowledge and education women are exposed to in order to further reduce
women’s ability to talk back, these motives are largely taken for granted and therefore the
archetypes and characters created as a result of these motives go unchallenged – they
become cemented in culture and moral expectations and take on the illusion of being
grounded in nature (Scholz 53).

This is also true of myths of men, but they are an issue of self-image – a man may
be troubled if he cannot live up to his notion of himself as the Knight In Shining Armor,
or some archetype of the sort, but it is a myth he sets up for himself, while the myths of
woman are made by men and subjected upon women with no input from the women in
question. These are not totally exclusive categories, but they bend towards this division
of Self and Other – if a woman rejects a man because he does not live up to her
construction of Prince Charming, the myth is the one that gives way to the human man
and the woman is considered shallow and ridiculous for rejecting a human being for not
being a dream, while if a man rejects a woman for not living up to his construction of the
virgin, the human woman gives way to the myth and is automatically categorized as a
whore who the man is right to reject.

“A myth always implies a subject who projects his hopes and fears toward a sky
of transcendence. Women do no set themselves up as Subject and hence have erected no
virile myth in which their projects are reflected…they still dream through the dreams of
men (Beauvoir 142).” The problem of fictional representation of women is not solved by
more and better female authors, because the vocabulary of fiction, in the form of
archetypes, symbols, acceptable tropes and ways of telling a romance story, and the like has been built over time by men and in order to be intelligible, women authors must still use this vocabulary to communicate their meaning.

A contemporary example that articulates the conundrum posed by the dependence of fiction on not just the individual author but on the myths and symbols that make up the tradition, context, and vocabulary of fiction, is the lack of female superhero movies. It would be easy to complain that this is only because young men, the target demographic of superhero movies, are not interested in female superheroes, but the issue is far more complicated than that. Superhero movies are based on superhero comics, which are continuing, serialized stories with long continuities stretching back decades, even in some cases to the 1930s. Only the most popular superheroes make the leap from comic to movie. The most popular superheroes are superheroes that have been around for a long time and have amassed large amounts of popular exposure and source material for use in movie adaptations. And if the superheroes have been around for a long time, this means they were created a long time ago, during times of stronger sexism and more rigid gender roles, and the female superheroes’ identities have been influenced since the beginning by sexist ideas that have had a long time to solidify and are difficult to shake without negating the identity and intelligibility of the female superhero in question. Myths work in much the same way, as a legacy clinging to definitions of what female characters are allowed to be like and still be recognizable and hold meaning.

The biggest constraint on the types of women who are allowed to exist in fiction and be understandable as women is the constraint on the roles and personalities female characters are allowed to inhabit. The mere visibility, let alone the sympathy and depth,
of fictional women’s roles is determined by whether they meet with the approval of men in terms of what men wish them to embody, for the purpose of being satisfying to men, and which are nearly always defined by the female characters’ relation to men in some way. This narrowing of available acceptable options reflects Beauvoir’s analysis of the real life problem women face in how they are allowed to define and shape their own identity.

**Immanence and Transcendence**

“Immanence” is the term Beauvoir uses to describe the historic domain assigned to women: a closed-off realm where women are interior, passive, static, and immersed in themselves. “Transcendence” designates the opposing male lot: active, creative, productive, powerful, extending outward into the external universe. “Every human life should permit the interplay of these two forces, immanence and transcendence, but throughout history, man has denied woman the transcendent role. Man has projects, activities, accomplishments; woman only has man” (Beauvoir). This is one of the concepts most strongly reinforced by fictional portrayals of female characters in multiple mediums, where two dominant trends within fictional representation that structurally restrict and pigeonhole what sorts of experiences of women are allowed to happen in stories. One is that females are very rarely protagonists, especially in genres or works that are not specifically targeted at women, or are not primarily about sexism, gender issues, or the condition of womanhood-defined-as-not-manhood. Another is that within this structure where women are rarely protagonists (and are therefore created largely as an aspect of the narrative landscape in order to facilitate the protagonist’s story), women are defined as extensions of men.
The problem of protagonists is a powerful one because the portrayal of a protagonist in a story influences the portrayal of supporting characters that exist largely to further the character arc of the protagonist. At least part of a supporting character’s existence is contingent on his or her relation to the protagonist -- narratively, if not explicitly. For example, while the character of Jesse Pinkman in *Breaking Bad* has a character arc, independent function, and internal significance of his own, his main role within the narrative of the show is to be acted upon by Walter White, the protagonist, whose increasingly destructive actions and growing moral corruption are dramatically externalized in the form of his effect on Jesse so that the viewers can observe and experience it more vividly.

This protagonist-supporter dichotomy is a longstanding, popular, and highly effective storytelling tool in its power to expose the logic and intelligibility of the inner workings of a fictional character and to analyze and make a statement about the web of actions and relations that define the character’s role and place in society, and define other characters’ roles by how they relate to the protagonist. Yet this device’s usefulness depends on multiplicity and diversity of protagonist identities. If a majority of protagonists are male (or white, or straight, or another privileged category) the aggregate effect, intentional or not, is to misleadingly imply that only the sorts of people who are sufficiently similar to the protagonist have inner workings, commit actions, or affect other people, in ways that are important enough to comprise a story that teaches the listener some part of how to define and make sense of the world.

Meanwhile, people who more closely resemble the sorts of people who are always supporting characters instead only have worth in how they relate to and are evaluated by
the sorts of people who are always protagonists, have identities that are not built
gthemselves but are circumscribed for them by, and according to the terms and experience
of, more powerful people, and who are not interesting or important recognizably human
enough to act as a stand-in for humanity in general. Women are not protagonists because
they are perceived as women, not people, and therefore their points of view or
philosophies of life are irrelevant when it comes to any questions, issues, conflicts,
desires, fears, or experiences that are not for women, or even, not exclusively for women.
Far fewer people would be interested in Walter White if he was a woman, because if he
were, the story and overall point of *Breaking Bad* would not so readily be seen as being
(among other things) about the moral corruptibility of human nature, but would instead
be parsed as being about the moral corruptibility of female nature.

**Women Are…**

Not only are women nearly always supporting characters in stories not
specifically and exclusively about women (meaning, stories that men do not have to pay
attention or take heed of because these stories are not relevant to them), but also, when
they are supporting characters their main (or only) function within a story is usually being
related to a male character in some way like a mother, daughter, or love interest rather
than have multiple functions or a role all of their own that is not attached to a male
character. As fiction is a way of communicating information, the information
communicated here is that women are meant to be auxiliaries to men. Laura Mulvey, in
interrogating the male gaze in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, says that in film,
melding image and meaning to make women synonymous with spectacle that has “to-be-
looked-at-ness (Mulvey, 4)” hinges on women being defined in terms of man.
What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance (Mulvey, 5).

Whether this message is perpetuated by convincing men and women of the inevitability, desirability, or normalcy of this idea, or simply by blocking or drowning out alternative roles for women, the effect is the same – reducing the story consumer’s ability to imagine women as having transcendence.

Definitions and abstractions that isolate a phenomenon in the way it is perceived by someone else are used to describe nearly everything. However, because women are explained and defined in relation to men, they are explained in a way that resembles how people explain non-human phenomena – by what they mean to humans. Concepts such as death or changing seasons or the sun and moon and stars, and the landscape of the earth, the difference between day and night, the connotations various animals carry, are rarely full, thick, holistic descriptions of those phenomena, they are representations of what these phenomena mean to humans, and if this qualification – what they mean to humans – is forgotten, for the sake of convenience. No one would ask the seasons, or the moon, or a tree, what it is. Their meaning comes from what they mean to humans. In associating women with nature and men with humans, women are excluded from the category of human being, and excluded from the conversation that allows them to be active in assigning and creating meaning out of the natural world based on their own thoughts and experiences, because they are turned into part of the natural world, always acted upon and unable to transcend their bodies and extend their thoughts into the world around them.
The fact that women, being humans, are able to speak, unlike the moon or the seasons, would theoretically make it impossible to make them into nature, but with sufficient negation of voice, it can be done. Dividing humans from nature along active-passive (and transcendent-immanent) lines leads to the process of turning a group of people who are different from the Self into part of nature themselves. First, it is assumed that everyone participating in a conversation about assigning meaning to nature has the same experience and therefore qualifying statements with “this is only how I see it” is unnecessary. No one living in a country situated near the Tropic of Cancer would routinely talk about the seasons by constantly qualifying every season-related statement by taking into account the fact that seasons do not match their experiences when on the equator, or in the southern hemisphere, or in the Arctic circle. If they assume that since their conversation is being held among people living near the Tropic of Cancer, there is no reason to act as if these other places are necessary to the active side of the conversation. These other people are that-which-is-spoken-about rather than that-which-speaks, and thereby become the Other.

This lack of inclusivity is inevitable in certain circumstances, but it means that if people forget that they are, in fact, leaving off qualifiers that make their experiences subjective and not objective, the understanding of such phenomena (continuing the parallel between women and phenomena) are distorted in two ways – one is that only the aspects of them that intersect with humans’ conscious experience and observation are taken into account or deemed significant, the second is that these aspects are described from the point of view of humans as if this point of view was absolute. If given the power and privilege to ignore attempts at communication, there is danger if people treat and
describe and tell stories about Other people as if these Others were parts of the landscape, fundamentally incapable of possessing intelligible intrinsic meaning of their own that is not bestowed upon them by their observers according to what the observer independently, without communication, decides these Others mean based on how they, the observer, experience the Other.

Ignoring the fact that these other people are actually human beings capable of creating their own meaning, capable of bestowing meaning based on their own experiences upon the people who are Other from their point of view, and capable of defining and objectifying and Othering the first group of people right back – or of communicating and creating a reciprocal flow of information and a mutual shared understanding in the form of stories where both groups of people may be protagonists – is willful misrepresentation that, due to its fundamental inability to authentically reflect or resonate with reality, become confusing, irritating, guilt-inducing (if one feels incapable or acting like a woman or treating a woman the way one is told is the normal human way), or simply stupid, false, and unbelievable.

Fictional stories are imbued with an assumption of a subjective and symbolic view of extra-human phenomena that must be mutually agreed upon to be understood – certain objects or situations have certain connotations that are based on how humans experience or think about them, and these connotations and symbols are systemized and made into an essential vocabulary for conveying meaning, especially when telling stories. In the same way, but far more violently, since women are so similar to men that it takes a lot of mental effort to turn them into objects, women are explained and described by men just as these natural phenomena are explained, with similar distortions and caricatures,
and these explanations, by men, of women, with little input from women – after all, a natural phenomenon cannot speak for itself – are used by all people, not just men, to understand this aspect of “nature,” or the landscape according to men, which is comprised of men’s understanding of women. Because this is by far the predominant and most widely accepted explanation of women, it is accepted as an explanation of everything that is important about women despite the fact that, like the meaning humans attach to natural phenomenon, it is tangential, partial and distorted by an outside point of view.

**Totalization**

A great many of the criticisms of how female characters are portrayed in media are downplayed because the female characters have nothing wrong with them in an interior sense. That is, if the story being conveyed in the form of fiction was actually happening in real life or was based on a real life story, the women in the story may have traits that are perfectly acceptable in real human beings. For example, there is nothing particularly wrong, in the real world, where there is no author controlling the events, decisions, and actions that occur, with a chain of events in which an armed or otherwise physically effective man rescues a helpless and terrified woman from harm at the hands of another man. It is simply a case of a unique individual human with a specific personal history that explains how he came to acquire the skills needed to pull off a rescue, showing decency towards another unique, individual human with a specific personal history explaining why she was in the situation she was in and why she was unable to fight her attacker off herself.
However, if this sequence of events is deliberately imagined and made into a story by an author who has absolute control over his or her fictional universe, however, it indicates that the author has made a decision to tell a story reinforcing, even if the reinforcement is ever so slight, unintentional, incidental, and unconscious, the implication that women are naturally passive and weak and men naturally strong and capable instead of a different story. This narrative would not necessarily be harmful if narratives containing such a sequence of events were a small enough portion of the totality of all stories told about the relations between men and women that it could be presented as just one of many possibilities for what is natural and acceptable for men and women to behave like. But when it becomes such a dominant and oft-replicated and unvarying trope that it acquires a nickname – “damsel in distress” – to indicate it is a stock event that is not contingent at all on the specific personalities and backstories of the characters in question, but contingent only on their genders, it becomes a way of communicating generalizable information about what a woman is, what a man is, and what the interaction between a man and a woman should naturally consist of – if the man and woman in question are not unnatural and deviant human beings.

The great harm in this comes from the attempt to force the theoretical category of “women” to be monolithic and ignore the variety of non-gender-defined experiences and differences between individual female human beings – and groups of female human beings as well. bell hooks, in her essay “The Oppositional Gaze,” which describes the Othering effect of the portrayal of black women in cinema, writes of the failure of feminist critics to acknowledge or distinguish the significance of racial difference among women as:
speak[ing] to the problem of structuring feminist film theory around a totalizing narrative of woman as object whose image functions solely to reaffirm and reinscribe the patriarchy…the concept “Woman” effaces the difference between women in specific socio-historical contexts…for it is only as one imagines “Woman” in the abstract, when woman becomes fiction or fantasy, can race not be seen as significant (hooks, 123-4).

The ability to think of women as “Woman,” and therefore as an inflexible and totalizing concept that submerges all other differences into the realm of trivia because of the overwhelming contingency of the possession of a female gender on the legitimacy of a person’s humanity, assumes that one does not need to communicate and receive much information from a woman, because the concept of “Woman” explains all women sufficiently.

Beauvoir’s rejection of this assumption is embodied in her idea of reciprocity between people, including men and women, which “entails the mutual recognition of the other’s freely chosen project. Each individual is both transcendence and immanence; reciprocity requires that we assert our own transcendence while we simultaneously acknowledge the transcendence of the other. Neither individual becomes object for the other’s subject (Scholz 76).” Only in the rejection of inauthentic definitions of what women are that spring from the combination of denying women voice and communication while simultaneously conflating men’s perceptions of women within this state of denial with absolute truth, can reciprocity be achieved. Both male and female creators must represent women as women rather than as the Other that is in actuality an aspect of man and not the reality of women, and women must give their own subjective experience of the world shape on her own terms – these are likely nearly as biased and limited as men’s subjective experience of women, but bias and limitations are inevitable,
the imbalance of power and voice and unwillingness to recognize limitations are harmful, and their effects exacerbated in the absence of reciprocity.

Just as men’s representation of women, like their representation of the world in general, says some more important about the male authors than about the women they portray, women’s representation of the world in general, including men, says something important about women who create them. Hilde Lindemann Nelson, in Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair, speaks of the “counterstory”, a story which “resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect” as a way of opposing misleading or harmful master narratives – “stories found lying about in our culture that serve as summaries of socially shared understandings (Nelson, 6).” Counterstories are stymied, however, because the inauthentic concept of “Woman” is compounded and engrained into people’s minds as these inauthentic definitions are infused with the illusion of authenticity, internal logic, and natural coherence with the world which occurs when an author uses his omnipotence to get around this bias, by changing and distorting the (fictional) world around his female character so that she makes sense within this fictional world that claims to be a reflection of reality.

Conclusion

I argue that the perpetuation of sexism through fiction is partly an epistemological problem. Epistemology is the study of how we know what we know. Beauvoir’s analysis of the Other as contrasted with the active, knowing Self/Subject, provides deep insight in this area. Some ideas are by far best communicated, in efficiency, intelligibility, and enjoyability, through fiction; so one of the many ways we know what we know is through fiction of one form or another. This works because we suspend our disbelief and accept,
for a moment, that the fictional universe an author has created in his image and has absolute control over represents reality. This is how we are able to know and believe things that are conveyed through fiction. However, this means that a story we hear is partially about the real world and partially an invention of the author with resultant biases and departures from the real world, and it is our job to understand which parts – ideas, attitudes, lessons both overt and implicit -- are about the real world and which parts -- characters and events -- are inventions that exist only within the story. Stories cannot exist without bias, but when nearly all stories have the same bias, the bias becomes invisible and taken for granted, and the idea the bias is related to, which should be understood as invention particular to the story, is absorbed as truth about the real world instead.

In these cases, “woman” as portrayed by the author has nothing to do with real women and is simply a personification of what the author sees or desires in women, or what the author has been taught by society and by restrictive tradition and historical context about women – but if either the creators or consumers of such stories do not notice this distinction due to the bias’s invisibility, it allows the momentary suspension of disbelief to meld reality and fiction in a misleading rather than illuminating way, and causes the person who hears it to come away mistakenly knowing something that is fiction as fact.
Bibliography


