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*I pledge my honor I have abided by the Stevens Honor System.*

An Ideal Relationship

Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex is one of the first modern feminist works of literature. It analyzes the roles men and women play in society, and the mutual oppression both sexes inflict upon each other. She opens the essay by introducing herself as a woman, then continues by analyzing why she feels compelled to introduce herself as such, when no man would ever consider doing the same thing. She concludes that man sees himself as “the self”, and he sees women as “the other,” a being that is derived from, and is inferior to, men. This assumption leads her along her essay, as she discusses the feminine and masculine ideals that society has created for the genders. These are described as being inherently flawed, and as creating an oppressive atmosphere for both genders, though women have it much worse. I find myself agreeing with several of her points, which is both impressive and saddening, seeing how long ago this was written. The masculine and feminine ideals are detrimental to society as a whole. The standards set for men and women are completely infeasible, and the impossible struggle to live up to these standards frustrates and oppresses both sexes. Beyond the need to feel “masculine” or “feminine”, society has long standing biases regarding the roles of men and women out in the workplace, and in the home. Men are seen as the breadwinners of the home, and women are seen as the housekeepers. These biases, like the other social constructs regarding gender, serve to hurt relations between the sexes. De Beauvoir believes that a complete dismantling of these biases is necessary to create a more accepting and liberating culture. She argues an ideal relationship between the sexes would be one in which both genders are offered the same options in life, and are treated identically. I find myself wondering if there isn’t some way to both honor and respect the differences between the genders while still treating them equally, but I still agree with the main points of her argument. An ideal relationship between the sexes would involve both sexes being offered equal opportunities, and suffering equal biases, if any, throughout their entire lives.

The image of the subordinate, feminine woman has persisted through countless generations, throughout most of history. De Beauvoir sought to understand why this image was created, and why it continues to be so prevalent, even in the modern age. Analyzing history yielded several examples of this subjugation, but no justification for it. Biology shows inherent differences between the sexes, but does nothing to support the idea that one is inferior or less capable than the other. Instead, this bias has been perpetuated by society, and is a fabrication with no true basis in fact. The essay continues, exploring a hypothetical young girl’s life as she is made to feel inferior and subordinate to the “superior” male sex. The points here are well made and completely accurate: society pressures girls to feel more like objects at every stage of their lives. They are conditioned to play with “girly” toys that promote ideals of motherhood, or ideals of fashion; baby dolls and Barbie dolls, for example. Beyond that they are taught to keep their voices down and to listen to instruction. While this goes on, the boys of the same age are encouraged to pursue things that interest them, and to go out and be the rambunctious kids they are. A blatant inequality exists here, and de Beauvoir discusses a way to fix it later on in the essay.

De Beauvoir believes that the concepts of the feminine girl, and of the masculine man, are entirely detrimental to the goal of equality for the sexes. Femininity, she argues, goes against the concept of equality between men and women, as it promotes women to be subservient to men and their whims. She continues to argue that a complete deconstruction of these stereotypes is necessary to create a society in which men and women are treated equally. In other words, she argues that men should abandon the ideal of masculinity, and women should abandon the ideal of femininity; instead, they should both assimilate to the same ideals, and should strive to meet the same standards. Doing this, she believes, will result in both sexes being offered equal opportunity and receiving equal treatment. While I agree that is certainly a way to achieve that goal, I wonder if the assimilation of both genders isn’t the most ideal solution. In the essay, de Beauvoir discusses the unique biological and psychoanalytical differences between men and women, and how they play into their identity as people, for better and for worse. A complete dismantling of society’s image of the sexes would lead to a more equal and fair treatment of them, but at the cost of the uniqueness of the genders. De Beauvoir, of course, would argue this is a good thing. She would argue there’s no reason to embrace the uniqueness of the sexes if it leads to the subjugation of one gender by the other. In this, she is right, but it can be argued that there is a way to embrace the uniqueness of the two genders and still treat them equally. De Beauvoir says that equal treatment would entail both genders receiving access to the same opportunities, and would be held to the same standards as each other. While this would certainly be possible if society’s biases towards gender were entirely removed, it would also be possible if these biases were simply reconstructed, instead of entirely deconstructed. Instead of creating a sort of androgynous, genderless world where the concept of sex is entirely irrelevant to a person’s identity, society should move toward redefining what it means to be a man or a woman, and should structure these new definitions in such a way that both receive equal treatment under the law and in society as a whole.

Society is slow to change. Most people take the lessons they learn as children and fight to defend those lessons for the majority of their lives. This attitude is what perpetuates racism, classism, and sexism, and is the reason these negative tendencies continue through many generations. Change is only seen in small increments over a long period of time. In this way, De Beauvoir’s goal of deconstructing society’s biases towards the genders is almost infeasible in the short term. It would involve somehow convincing the entire world’s population that they had been taught wrong, and that a new way of life - entirely contradictory to their old one - was more morally correct. It would have to be accomplished by teaching children from the youngest age that they are equal to each other, protecting them from all of the pressures to act in these old stereotypical ways from society on all fronts, and making sure their parents didn’t act against this new way of thinking. Universal adoption of this idea, which is almost essential to its success, is nearly impossible. Instead, a slightly more feasible short term solution is a restructuring of the current biases that society has created for itself. Teaching women confidence, offering them more and more opportunity, and helping to prevent the “superiority complex” society helps men develop at early ages, would help move society towards being more accepting overall. It could be argued that this exact trend has been underway for the past few decades; women are seeing increased representation in the workplace and are slowly but surely reaching better, more equal, treatment. It could be argued, however, that women have been seen in the workplace only because our present society needs them to be working for the economy’s sake, so it came to some sort of begrudging compromise in letting them work like men do. This is definitely true on some level, but if women and society as a whole can use this opportunity as a way to secure more equal opportunity for women, I believe it’s a step in the right direction. Even de Beauvoir would have to admit that things have improved from the time she wrote The Second Sex, though we are still leaps and bounds away from an ideal relationship between the sexes.

Simone de Beauvoir discusses society’s treatment of women throughout her essay, and comes to many logical conclusions about this treatment. She finds that, while it has been going on for centuries upon centuries, all over the world, there is very little basis for it. Science has proven that the differences between the sexes do not denote one as being superior to the other, and history has shown that man’s treatment of women has been perpetuated by societal norms, and nothing more. She then discusses an ideal future where a girl is treated exactly like her brothers. The girl is offered the same opportunities, is held to the same high standards, and is given the confidence she needs to succeed on her own in life, just like the boys around her. This future is a goal we should strive for, but I disagree with de Beauvoir’s solution to the problem, at least for the short term. She advocates for a complete dismantling of society’s notion of the feminine girl, and believes that doing so will lead society to her ideal future. While she may be right, that future can be worked towards simply by redefining the current stereotypes placed on both boys and girls, which can be done by teaching boys to treat girls with as much respect as anybody else, and by offering girls the same opportunities and liberties that are offered to boys. Doing these things, as we have already started to do in the past few decades, will get us on our way towards Simone de Beauvoir’s envisioned future.