

From man's point of view [...] behavior of alienation is consider feminine, and behavior where the subject posits his transcendence is considered masculine. [...] Man [is defined] as a human being and woman as a female: every time she acts like a human being, the woman is said to be imitating the male.

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Vol. I, Pt. I, Chap. II).

The Second Sex

Beauvoir's idea that, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman," suggests a socialization process that pushes women into adopting culturally acceptable roles-- a move from a freedom to develop as an individual and toward an imperative to develop as a type. For men, however, there is less corresponding danger, since society defines masculinity precisely by the one thing that it would deny women: an active and ongoing role in shaping one's destiny. Women, in this formulation, always reflect male roles, inverted like a mirror, in binary opposition to the masculine. Thus, if a man is active, a woman must be passive (or else she is not behaving like a woman and is sanctioned accordingly). As Beauvoir says in her introduction to *The Second Sex*, "[Man] is the Subject; he is the Absolute. [Woman] is the Other" (4). Given this, men are in a much better position to seize their existential freedom than women.

My Brilliant Friend

Write two paragraphs in which you analyze the social setting of the novel in terms of gender from the point of view of either Elena or Lila. One paragraph should concern the direction in which your character is pushed to conform to a passive or dependent role, and one paragraph should concern the way that your character pushes back. Do not write contrasting paragraphs with one about Elena and one about Lila, as one of the points of this exercise is to force you to more fully develop a complex idea (rather than superficially develop two).

Whether (or to what degree) this socialization is successful depends on the character, the situation you will be engaging, and the way in which you analyze the evidence. Look for complexities and conflict in the novel, not a black or white resolution to contradictions. You should also not be afraid to show how an aspect of either Elena or Lila's character development embodies an idea that Beauvoir explicitly critiques.

Your argument will be more persuasive if you focus on a specific type of social behavior (allowing for more specific development), instead of focusing broadly on the big idea. In other words, the more specifically you narrow your topic for writing, the more technical and informed it allows your writing to become. Specific ways to narrow the topic include (but are not limited to): sexual awakening or puberty; domestic roles assigned to women; specific behaviors to achieve transcendence (such as designing shoes); male violence as a cultural norm (including sexual violence); or education as a gendered practice.

Your analysis should be in terms of Beauvoir's argument, but the writing should be focused on characters and situations in *My Brilliant Friend*. Reference to both works is required, but specific quotation need only come from Ferrante. This does not mean, however, that reference to *The Second Sex* should only be in passing or the way in which you engage Beauvoir's ideas only be in the most general terms. Assignments that do not demonstrate an understanding of *both* the novel and the selection from *The Second Sex* will receive no higher grade than a C. I suggest looking at my model (in the supplemental resources) to get a better understanding of the balance between the two texts. I have also previously given you a handout (Incorporating Secondary Sources into Your Writing) that explicitly addresses this balance (it is still downloadable from the AP Writing section of my web-site if you have lost your copy).

As always, you must include parenthetical citations when referring to a text. If you use a quote or idea from *The Second Sex* that occurs from somewhere other than the introduction (either the quote at the top of this assignment or a quote that is embedded in the downloadable version of the in-class presentation), use the same format that I did (Vol. __, Pt. __, Chap. __) rather than page numbers.

Grading and Due Date

This is due Friday November 12. If you turn in the assignment early enough, I will mark it up with comments and corrections as if it were a timed writing. If you turn in the assignment early, there will be a small grade incentive (+3 points). If you miss the midnight deadline but turn in the assignment before eight hours have elapsed, there will be a small point deduction (-3 points). If you turn in the assignment between eight and twenty-four hours late there will be a larger point deduction (-10 points). If you turn in the assignment at any point after that, there will be a substantial point deduction (-20 points; this is a flat deduction, not a cumulative one based on the number of days late). If you turn in the assignment late, but do not want points deducted, you may earn back credit by doing the assignment again with any one of the Japanese stories from the beginning of the year (including the supplemental stories from my web site).



Simone de Beauvoir
1908-1986