

More Help with the Beauvoir/Ferrante Assignment

For my text, I am using Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral's 1954 "The Other Woman" (translated from the Spanish by Ursula K. Le Guin). Mistral (pseudonym of Lucila Godoy Alcayaga) is one of the most important Latin American poets of the first half of the 20th century, winner of the 1945 Nobel Prize in Literature, and a widely celebrated figure in her native Chile.

The poem is often read autobiographically-- as being about Mistral's closeted lesbian identity and the need to suppress a part of herself that she had come to despise (at least according to Mistral's close friend, the Mexican diplomat Palma Guillen de Nicolau). The text itself is more ambiguous-- though the fire and burning imagery of the poem certainly could connote sexual passion. The power of the poem, however, is not dependent on a biographical reading, and some of the ambiguities are clearly not intended to be completely untangled. Thus, my reading here should in no way be taken for definitive, especially since I treat the subject more generally, instead of as a sexual metaphor (though this would be the second half of my argument were I expanding this into an actual essay about the ways that patriarchal norms socialize women to subvert their authentic identity).

"The Other Woman"

I killed a woman in me.
I didn't love her.

She was the flower flaming
from the mountain cactus,
she was dryness and fire;
nothing could cool her.

Stone and sky she had
underfoot and around her;
never did she kneel
to seek the gaze of water.

Where she lay down to rest
she withered the grass
with the heat of her breath,
the ember of her face.

Her speech hardened
quick as pitch,
so no soft charm
could be released.

She couldn't bow,
the mountain plant,
while I beside her
bowed and bent.

I left her to die,
robbing her of my heart.
She ended like that,
an eagle starved.

Her wings stopped beating,
she bowed down, spent,
and her quenched spark
dropped in my hand.

Her sisters still
mourn her, accuse me,
and the burning quicklime
claws me as I pass.

Going by I tell them:
"Look in the creekbeds,
from their clays
make another fire-eagle.

If you can't,
well then, forge her!
I killed her. You, too,
you kill her!"

Here's the text in the Spanish original:

"La Otra"

Una en mí maté:
yo no la amaba.

Era la flor llameando
del cactus de montaña;
era aridez y fuego;
nunca se refrescaba.

Piedra y cielo tenía
a pies y a espaldas
y no bajaba nunca
a buscar "ojos de agua".

Donde hacía su siesta,
las hierbas se enroscaban
de aliento de su boca
y brasa de su cara.

En rápidas resinas
se endurecía su habla,
por no caer en linda
presa soltada.

Doblarse no sabía
la planta de montaña,
y al costado de ella,
yo me doblaba...

La dejé que muriese,
robándole mi entraña.
Se acabó como el águila
que no es alimentada.

Sosegó el aletazo,
se dobló, lacia,
y me cayó a la mano
su pavesa acabada...

Por ella todavía
me gimen sus hermanas,
y las gredas de fuego
al pasar me desgarran.

Cruzando yo les digo:
-- Buscad por las quebradas
y haced con las arcillas
otra águila abrasada.

Si no podéis, entonces
¡ay! olvidadla.
Yo la maté. Vosotras
también matadla!

As far as tips about how to write about the two texts effectively, you will have more luck if you narrow first to the aspect of *The Second Sex* that you want to write about. This seems like strange advice for someone who is always urging students to remember to focus more on the primary text than the secondary one, but to do anything else risks having the integration from *The Second Sex* feel more like an add-on than a true synthesis. Your focus should be on the primary text, but when you're coming up with an *approach* to the writing task, let the more limiting of the two texts set the parameters.

When you go to actually structure your paragraphs, the easiest way is to have a topic sentence that identifies how something you are going to write about in the primary text is like an idea from the

secondary text. Of course, it may be possible that your “topic sentence” is actually two or even three sentences (this is the case with my second paragraph in the example).

If you need me to be more explicit, what I am suggesting is a two part task for each paragraph that follows this template: *Here’s this important, thematic thing that is going on in the primary text; I will show how it can be explained by ideas contained within the secondary text.* Doing this makes it easy to structure paragraphs, as following the topic sentence you will have 1) a close reading of something from the primary text; 2) a transition to a discussion of the secondary text (the more seamless, the better; 3) a technical discussion of the theoretical idea in the secondary text; and 4) a short summation that explains the relevance of this to the primary text. I follow this structure for both my paragraphs. The trick, however, is to do it in such a way that it doesn’t feel mechanical or step-by-step. If you can nail the transitions, you will be more likely to avoid this pitfall.

Enough talk: here’s what I came up with:

Gabriela Mistral’s “The Other Woman” documents the submersion of the speaker’s passionate, ungovernable self in favor of a more socially acceptable persona -- a counterpart to existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir’s explanation of how women are co-opted into system of vassalage through the acceptance of their role as the Other. In the poem, identity consists of much more than one’s public persona. Instead, each individual contains within herself multitudes -- not just as the titular subject, but also the other “sisters” (31) who reside within --, since the contradictory, sometimes antagonistic facets of an individual’s personality cannot be assimilated into an easily digestible whole. What emerges triumphant as the public face of the speaker, however, is not the “flower flaming / from the mountain cactus” (3-4), the one about whom the speaker claims “never did she kneel / to seek the gaze of water” (9-10), but instead the self who “killed [this] woman in me” (1) -- even though this self is “bowed and bent” (22,) in contrast to the one who “couldn’t bow” (19). The heat of the murdered self, who “withered the grass / with the heat of her breath” (12-13) even at rest, connotes the uncontainable passion that the speaker “didn’t love” (2), suggesting that the self who has killed her is, in some ways, her antithesis. This is explicit in the aforementioned refusal of the passionate self to bow, compared to the more sensible self who kills her-- a self defined by this very amenability. This is implicit in the description of the death of this passionate self, who is described as a “quenched spark” (*pavesa acabada*-- more literally, a “spent ember”) (29) through the extinguishing of that fire by “robbing her of [the speaker’s] heart” (24). Not coincidentally, it is the pliant, cooling self who tames the fires within (rather than the other way around), since this self-identification with passivity embodies more overtly “feminine” characteristics in a society that values women only insofar as they conform to their role as the Other -- a refusal, as Beauvoir describes it, “to assert [oneself] as subject” and instead exist as one who is “passive, alienated, and lost, is prey to a foreign will, cut off from his transcendence, [and] robbed of all worth” (8). To put it more simply, in acceding to a passive feminine ideal (in contrast to the more active autonomy of the male subject), women diminish their capacity to define for themselves the standards by which they live, since this self-determination requires exactly the kind of active passion that the speaker in Mistral’s poem denies. Male subjects, in this

formulation, are protagonists in their own drama, while female objects are conceived of as the opposite of their male counterparts (the Other). Thus, men have a greater capacity to transcend their circumstances, to become something other than how they would be defined, while women (as the opposing half of the male—female binary) epitomize the immanence of residing within one's present station. In the language of the poem, society values women who are "bowed and bent" (22), not those who "couldn't bow" (19) -- since the latter is a strictly masculine prerogative. Seen this way, the triumph of a weaker, more acquiescent self over a stronger, more ungovernable alternative reenacts the way that women in patriarchal societies routinely submerge inclination to better accommodate a world that more greatly esteems their submission to inaction.

However, that this passionate self exists at all suggests that the process of deference to social ideals is not absolute; in fact, the poem explicitly indicates that the death of this self is not as irrevocable as one might assume. Together, the existence of both selves implies a latent potentiality that establishes that one's status as a woman does not necessarily determine one's future -- that the authority of patriarchy does, in fact, have limits. For example, notice that the "other woman" is compared not only to a flower, but to an "eagle" (26). Like the fire imagery, the eagle connotes ideas more commonly associated with masculine traits: active and consuming, especially considering the number of birds that could have easily been used as a possible substitutes -- many of them with explicitly gendered associations (doves, nightingales, etc.). An eagle, however, is both a predator (suggesting strength of volition) and powerful (connoting a physical vitality that translates into power). Notably, even submerged, even unloved, even ultimately slain: these characteristics still exist; they still (at least partially) define the speaker. More significantly, though, the speaker has not extinguished these traits, as they are capable of being resurrected, since it is possible to "make another fire-eagle" (38). Hence, as an image of *potential* transcendence, the powerful raptor is not vanquished any more than the fire has been permanently smothered. For instance, the "burning quicklime" continues to claw the speaker as she passes (34)-- a symbolic reminder of the fire's continuing potency even after it has been "quenched" (29). In this way, Mistral suggests that, though unrealized, the capacity for freedom remains, even when the thing that "couldn't bow" (19) does indeed prostrate (28) when denied the nourishment of the speaker's heart (24). For Beauvoir, "Every subject [...] accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future," yet when forced into roles that discourage this transcendence "an attempt is made to freeze [woman] as an object and doom her to immanence" (13). This is, of course, not a literal oppression, but a socially constructed prison of ideas that conceives of women as the Other. However, as an ideological construct, it is composed of ideas -- itself the result of individual will. One ultimately *chooses* to conceive of oneself as an object, to suppress the will, and to choose bad faith over existential freedom. As such, the *capacity* for freedom, action, and power over one's life never disappears, no matter how much one works to repress it. For Mistral's speaker, as with all women in patriarchal societies, the potential for self-definition always remains.