



Motherhood in Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

Skye Cleary
Columbia University

Beauvoir argues that maternal instinct is a myth and love for one's children is a choice. Gestating babies and breastfeeding is a natural female function – which tends to tie women to being “prey of the species” (541) – however; the obligation to rear children is not. Taking on the role of a mother is a commitment that can be chosen or rejected. This logic is based on her famous statement in *The Second Sex* (1949) that, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (283), meaning that a woman’s biology does not determine her destiny. However, historically, women have been oppressed and defined by the biological functions that they share with other animals and tethered in rituals and myths about femininity, barred from transcending, that is, reaching beyond the given towards self-chosen concrete goals. To accept a role such as motherhood because it’s expected, rather than actively chosen, is inauthentic. Often mothers try to seek to justify their lives through their children, but that is to treat the child as an instrument, that is, an object instead of a subject. Authentic parent-child relationships would be possible, Beauvoir envisaged, when a mother does not abandon her transcendence or use the child as a means to her own ends. When she can choose both a child and a career and has the structural support to do so, having a child will be a freely chosen responsibility and authentic engagement (439, 566).

Primary Sources:

Beauvoir, Simone de 2011. *The Second Sex*. Borde, Constance & Malovany-Chevallier, Sheila (trans.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Secondary Sources:

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