

A Brief Feminist Analysis of Beauvoir's *Les Inséparables* through the Lens of Dual-Narrative

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Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir's novel *Les Inséparables* employs a "dual-narrative" structure to explore the symbiotic yet conflicted friendship between two girls. The mirror-like relationship between the dual female protagonists serves as an allegory for female self-awareness: Sylvie breaks free from patriarchal constraints to construct her subjectivity, while Andrée resists through tragic self-destruction. Drawing on Lacan's mirror stage theory and feminist perspectives, this paper analyzes the characters and their relationships under the dual-narrative framework, revealing the feminist ethos embedded in the text.

Keywords

Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Inséparables*, dual-narrative.

1. Introduction

Les Inséparables, written in 1954 by French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), remained unpublished until 2020 due to the pioneer of existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre's disapproval. This semi-autobiographical work, narrated in the first person, chronicles Beauvoir's profound friendship with her childhood companion Zaza. Through the metaphor of "double flowers"—two women intertwined by shared experiences yet divergent fates—Beauvoir critiques patriarchal oppression and mourns the sacrificial cost of female liberation. The term "double flowers" refers to "two women who share similar upbringings, exhibit congruent or contrasting personalities, and whose destinies are inextricably linked." [1] Building on Jacques Lacan's concept of the "mirror stage," this dual-narrative framework explores how female relationships mirror one another, interrogating women's existential dilemmas and the construction of female subjectivity. [2]

While dual-narratives frequently appear in films and multi-perspective novels, scholarly analysis of Beauvoir's work remains limited. This paper applies the dual-narrative lens to *Les Inséparables*, dissecting the protagonists' mirroring dynamics through three phases—formation, obsession, and rupture—to illuminate Beauvoir's feminist praxis.

2. Mirrored Doubles: Female Protagonists in *Les Inséparables*

Jacques Lacan's (1901–1981) "mirror stage" theory posits that infants aged 6–18 months begin recognizing their mirrored reflections as idealized versions of themselves, a process of misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) that shapes self-identity. [3]

In *Les Inséparables*, the timid Sylvie idolizes the rebellious Andrée, projecting her desire for liberation onto her friend as a mirror image. This dynamic echoes Lacan's assertion that "the mirror-stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies." [4]

Ultimately, Sylvie transcends this illusion to reclaim agency, while Andrée succumbs to societal pressures—a tragic duality encapsulated by Beauvoir's adoptive daughter's remark: "Zaza was the price she paid for her freedom." [6]

2.1. Formation of the Mirror Image

Set against post-WWI France's socioeconomic turmoil, Sylvie's middle-class Catholic family faces financial collapse, whereas Andrée's affluent "radical Catholic" household remains insulated. Both girls endure patriarchal repression, their self-perceptions shaped by maternal figures steeped in religious dogma. Sylvie's mother warns, "There is no future in spinsterhood," [6] while Andrée's mother enforces piety through emotional manipulation. Lacan notes that self-consciousness arises from "the discourse of the Other," [5] and here, the mothers embody the patriarchal "Other" that molds their daughters' fractured identities.

Andrée's introduction as "a living girl scorched by fire" [6] captivates Sylvie, who admires her friend's intellectual boldness and artistic intuition. Their shared ambition to become educated women cements their "inseparable" bond, forming a symbiotic mirror relationship where each reflects the other's latent desires.

2.2. Obsession with the Mirror

Lacan argues that the mirror stage conflates reality with fantasy, as the subject "recognizes" itself in an idealized image. [7] Sylvie's idolization of Andrée exemplifies this: she envies Andrée's academic brilliance and emotional independence, declaring, "You (Andrée) are my entire life... My existence feels empty without you." [6] This obsession stifles Sylvie's selfhood, as she internalizes guilt over minor disagreements with Andrée on religious matters.

2.3. Breaking through the Mirror

The mirror, existing in Lacan's imaginary order, inevitably fractures when confronted with the real. Sylvie's liberation begins when her father's bankruptcy frees her from marital expectations, whereas Andrée, burdened by familial duties, spirals into self-abnegation. The arrival of Pascal, a male suitor, further destabilizes their relationship. Sylvie's growing independence—"Now I have others, and myself"—marks her transition from mirroring to self-actualization. [6] Andrée, however, trapped by maternal expectations and unrequited love, resigns herself to domestic drudgery, symbolizing the tragic fate of women who internalize patriarchal norms.

3. The Enclosure of the Other: Feminism in the Patriarchal Context

Feminism, defined as "a political movement opposing gender-based discrimination and advocating equality," [12] permeates *Les Inséparables*. The protagonists' struggles unfold within a web of patriarchal "Others"—both large (symbolic order) and small (interpersonal relationships).

3.1. Complicit Women under Patriarchy

Andrée's mother, Madame Carré, epitomizes the self-oppressed woman: she manipulates Andrée through guilt while romanticizing her own arranged marriage. Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, observes: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine." [13] The Carré women—from the authoritarian grandmother to the self-sacrificing Andrée—embody this intergenerational cycle of subjugation.

3.2. Patriarchal Men as Enforcers of Tradition

Male characters—like Pascal, who dismisses Andrée's emotions as "hysterical"—epitomize patriarchal indifference. The Carré men debate politics while relegating women to domestic

roles, illustrating Beauvoir's critique of how "man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him." [13]

3.3. Non-Traditional Men: Glimmers of Hope

Andrée's father and childhood love Bernard represent nuanced masculinities. Bernard's sensitivity and respect for Andrée's autonomy hint at Beauvoir's vision of reciprocity, aligning with third-wave feminism's emphasis on male allyship. Bell Hooks argues that feminism should "enable men to reclaim the best parts of themselves," [11] a notion reflected in Bernard's affirmation: "Only Bernard loved me for who I am." [6]

4. Conclusion

Les Inséparables offers a searing indictment of patriarchal systems that reduce women to "empty signifiers" (Laura Mulvey's term [8]). Sylvie's emancipation through writing contrasts with Andrée's martyrdom, underscoring Beauvoir's existentialist conviction that "freedom is won through revolt." The novel's dual-narrative structure, oscillating between liberation and annihilation, urges women to dismantle the "mirror" of patriarchal discourse and reclaim their voices. As Beauvoir reminds us, only through such rupture can women inscribe their lived experiences into the symbolic order—transforming pain into a lexicon of empowerment.

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