



Tete-a-Tete

By Hazel Rowley
ISBN: 9780060520601

Introduction

Theirs was a love story for the ages—Jean Paul Sartre, the famous existential philosopher, and Simone de Beauvoir, author of the groundbreaking feminist work, *The Second Sex*. In a taboo-breaking relationship that spanned over fifty years, they promised love but not marriage, commitment but not fidelity, and above all else, absolute honesty to each other.

With access to personal interviews and unpublished correspondence, Hazel Rowley uncovers the reality behind the public façade: the all-too-human jealousies and frailties, a parade of lovers used and discarded, hypocrisy, lechery, and callousness. Sartre boasted of nine simultaneous mistresses. Beauvoir's lover, Chicago novelist Nelson Algren, discovered the truth about their relationship while reading her memoirs. They supported communism (to the dismay of Soviet friends), protested French treatment of Algeria and pushed for abortion rights. Despite it all, Sartre and Beauvoir's genius remains

undiminished for their lives buttressed their work, blending seamlessly into writings that yoked passion to clarity and intellectual rigor, creating benchmarks of modern thought.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you characterize Jean Paul Sartre? Is it possible to reconcile the contradictions of a man who seduced women around him, yet admitted that sex gave him little pleasure, who lost interest in each woman soon after conquest yet supported his mistresses (both former and current) to the end of his days?
2. How would you characterize Simone de Beauvoir? She hid her bisexuality, jealousy and loneliness in order to burnish the myth of having it all—"freedom *and* stability, love affairs *and* commitment." Do you find her choices, both risky and sacrificial, to be courageous or foolish? Can women "have it all" today?
3. Discussing Sartre's merciless self-analysis, Rowley rhetorically asks, "was it exhibitionism? Was he taking responsibility for his actions? Or was it a form of exoneration?" Given Sartre's confession that writing made him feel worthwhile, but that seduction left an aftertaste of self-disgust, how would you answer Rowley's questions?
4. Why, according to Sartre, are we "condemned to be free?" Consider Existentialism's influence on modern thinking about responsibility, choice, freedom, and concrete action. What world events set the stage for this philosophy, and why was it such a shocking break from other ideas of the time?
5. Existentialism states that people have "no excuses" and are "lying to themselves about their freedom" if they try to justify failure or inaction. Do you find Sartre's creation of "temporary morality" to be an "act of bad faith"? A cheap rationalization? Or a defiant refusal to allow "any preestablished code to determine *his* life"?
6. Sartre and Beauvoir scorned the conformity, conventionality, and hypocrisies of bourgeois life, yet do you think the life they created—Sartre on his "medical rounds" while Beauvoir valiantly hid her loneliness and fears of aging—any less hypocritical? Did the notion of "transparency" ultimately become a fallacy?
7. "How can love be *contingent*?" Nelson Algren asked in a scathing review of *Force of Circumstance*. Rowley repeatedly states that Beauvoir would have liked Sartre to herself. By unchaining love from fidelity (or even a sexual relationship) what did Sartre and Beauvoir create?
8. In novels such as *She Came to Stay* and *The Mandarins*, not to mention her more forthrightly autobiographical work, how did reality provide fodder for Beauvoir's fiction? For Sartre's? Does the act of writing inexorably distort the reality it seeks to record?
9. In the case of philosophers and artists, should their personal life affect how work is perceived? Does knowing the truth about Sartre and Beauvoir's affairs force a reevaluation of their philosophies?
10. How did Sartre encourage Beauvoir's development as a feminist writer? Do you think Beauvoir's assessment of the female condition—of "otherness" and double standards, of the ease of being "kept" and the "price of independence"—remains true today? If one examines the other women in the Sartre-Beauvoir family through Beauvoir's own feminist framework, what could be concluded about each? What do you think of Beauvoir's own conduct?