

The Death of the Other, the Death of the Self: A New Reading of Simone de Beauvoir's Novel *She Came to Stay*

La muerte del Otro, la muerte del Yo: una nueva lectura de la novela *La invitada* de Simone de Beauvoir

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In this article, I present a new reading of the ending of Simone de Beauvoir's first novel, *She Came to Stay* (*L'Invitée*). Throughout the novel different authors have identified some ideas on existentialism and phenomenology, more specifically seeing the novel as a representation of the Master-Slave Dialectic, but my reading of the final scene goes beyond a simple murder. Using a new interpretation of the Master-Slave Dialectic, I will argue that by killing Xavière, Françoise also killed her own conscience, her own self. Françoise was not only killing Xavière but also committing suicide. We will also see more explicitly how Simone de Beauvoir understood existence and dependency.

Keywords: *She Came to Stay* (*L'Invitée*), Master-Slave Dialectic, Self-consciousness.

En este artículo presento una nueva lectura de la primera novela de Simone de Beauvoir, *She Came to Stay* (*L'Invitée*, *La Invitada*). Diferentes autores han identificado algunas ideas sobre existencialismo y fenomenología a lo largo de la novela, más específicamente la novela como una representación de la Dialéctica del Amo y el Esclavo de Hegel, pero mi lectura de la escena a final de la historia va más allá de un simple asesinato. Usando una nueva interpretación de esta Dialéctica, argumentaré que, al matar a Xavière, Françoise también estaba matando su propia consciencia, su propio ser. Françoise no solo estaba matando a Xavière, sino también cometiendo un suicidio. Se entenderá mejor también lo que Simone de Beauvoir entendía por existencia y dependencia.

Palabras clave: *La Invitada*, La Dialéctica del Amo y el Esclavo, autoconsciencia.

*The category of the Other
is as primordial as consciousness itself.*

Simone de Beauvoir
The Second Sex

Each conscience seeks the death of the other. Hegel.

This is the epigraph of Simone de Beauvoir's novel *She Came to Stay*. Is this sentence revealing what happens in the novel? Is it warning us that a murder is going to happen at any moment? Is Beauvoir telling us that the novel is based on Hegel's ideas? The answer to all of these questions could be yes, but it is not that simple.

She Came to Stay is described as a philosophical novel (Fullbrook, 1999; Simons, 1999; Scheu, 2012) that portrays the relationship that Simone de Beauvoir had with Jean Paul Sartre and their multiple lovers. The novel could be read not only as a love/death story but also as the development of Beauvoir's ideas on existentialism.

Through the entire novel we can see that Beauvoir uses some of Hegel's concepts about consciousness and self-consciousness. Whether she took Hegel's ideas in order to write her novel is still a mystery. Debbie Evans, in her article *Sartre and Beauvoir on Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic and the Question of the "Look"*, states:

The Hegelian influence on *She Came to Stay* has been difficult to gauge in the past, partly due to Beauvoir's remarks in *The Prime of Life* that the epigraph was only selected *after* she had begun to write her novel, and that when she began to read Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the National Library in July 1940, she understood virtually nothing of his text (p. 93).

Even though Beauvoir states that she did not fully understand Hegel's work, this does not mean that these concepts were not resounding in her mind while she was writing the novel or that it helped her to expand her own concepts about it.

According to most of the critics' analysis, Françoise just kills Xavière at the end (Simons, 1999; Fullbrook, 1999; Evans, 2009; McWeeny, 2011). It is understandable that this is what readers understand because Françoise consciously decides to kill Xavière by pulling down the gas lever. However, this last scene involves much more than a murder.

Among the different interpretations of the novel, there is the idea of the story as a reading of Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic. Hegel offers this Dialectic as a way to explain how humans relate to each other and how each person needs another one in order to achieve self-consciousness. It is hard to affirm that the novel is based on Hegel's ideas, but I do agree that the

novel could be analyzed through this dialectic. My reading of the final scene is different from the ones presented by most of the aforementioned critics. Using a new interpretation of the Master-Slave Dialectic, I will argue that by killing Xavière, Françoise was also killing her own conscience, her own self. Françoise was not only killing Xavière, but also committing suicide.

Margaret A. Simons, in her text *From Murder to Morality: The Development of Beauvoir's Ethics*, interprets the last scene of the novel as a murder. In this text, Simons analyzes Beauvoir's own thoughts about life. She takes Beauvoir's diary and compares it with *She Came to Stay*, noting the ethic values shared in both texts. Simons based her analysis on the fact that the end of the novel could only be read as a murder:

Françoise's murder of Xavière at the novel's conclusion, while in one sense the victory of egoism over an ethics of care, might also represent the defeat of solipsism. Xavière's refusal to recognize and care for the needs of the other brings about her own death, destroyed by the other's murderous rage (p. 2).

By emphasizing this, Simons is leaving out any other possible interpretation of the novel.

On the other hand, Jennifer McWeeny, in her article *The Feminist Phenomenology of the Excess: Ontological Multiplicity, Auto-jealousy, and Suicide in Beauvoir's L'Invitée*, presents a different perspective of the novel. She explains the end of the novel as an assisted suicide because, according to her, Xavière always showed suicidal desires through the novel. According to McWeeny:

From the very start of *L'Invitée*, its characters and its reader know that Xavière is suicidal [...] For example, Xavière is excessively moody to say the least, she sometimes stays in bed all day and withdraws from her social commitments, she frequently engages in self-harming behaviors such as burning herself and sniffing ether, and on many occasions she publicly threatens suicide (p. 65).

However, Xavière's self-harming does not necessarily mean that she wants to die. It could simply denote her masochistic impulses. In the same sense, her suicidal threats could be seen as a way to manipulate Françoise and Pierre in order to get what she wants seeing as from the beginning Xavière is presented as a spoiled child who gets upset when she cannot get what she desires.

At the end of her text, McWeeny reveals that even though she considers the end of the novel as an assisted suicide, it is one that never actually occurs:

More importantly, this suicide is also not one because it is never really committed. The novel comes to a close before Françoise's intention is fulfilled and Xavière dies,

thus leaving the ending of this story in excess of the text itself. From the reader's perspective, we do not know whether Françoise lets Xavière die, whether she reconsiders and "saves" her, whether Xavière leaves her room to plead for reconciliation, or whether something else intervenes (p. 71).

I consider that this is an accurate interpretation of the ending as we actually do not know what happens after Françoise goes into her room. What I disagree with is the idea of an assisted suicide. I am not convinced that Xavière was looking for her own death but just manipulating every situation in order to fulfill her desires. For example, when Françoise and Pierre find out that Xavière told Gerbert that they all went out on Friday night without him, they become a little angry (Beauvoir, 1999), and the way Xavière fixes the situation is by acting like a victim and saying bad things about herself: "'I'm such a coward', Xavière said, 'I ought to kill myself, I ought to have done it long time ago.' Her face was contorted. 'I will do it', she said, suddenly defiant" (p. 109). After this, Françoise and Pierre end up calming her down and taking care of her. These kinds of situations keep happening throughout the story.

McWeeny also states that "any interpretation of the ending of *L'Invitée* is dependent on a reading of Xavière, since whatever Xavière represents is what Françoise puts to death" (p. 64). This is exactly one of the statements that I have based my interpretation on. We will see later on what Xavière meant for Françoise, or, to be more specific, what Françoise was putting to death when she kills Xavière.

At the beginning of the novel, Beauvoir establishes Françoise as a strong and confident character who reflects on the objects around her. She feels powerful by giving life to these objects: "When she was not there [the theater], the smell of dust, the half-light, the forlorn solitude, all this did not exist for anyone, it did not exist at all. [...] She exercised this power: her presence revived things from their inanimateness; she gave them their color, their smell" (1999, p. 12). From this point on, we can see how important the theater is for Françoise, how she reflects about it, and how important these two things make her feel: "She alone released the meaning of these abandoned places, of these slumbering things. She was there and they belonged to her. The world belonged to her" (1999, p. 12).

Later on, we find a passage where Françoise reflects on an old jacket hanging on the back of a chair. She wonders if the jacket is able to recognize its own situation and what would happen if she tries to do it on its behalf. Here we can see that Françoise is conscious about objects and about how these objects cannot be conscious of themselves. However, she has not yet reached her self-conscience, since, according to Hegel (1977),

Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come *out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it

does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self (p. 111).

Françoise does not recognize herself in the jacket; she just recognizes the object and the fact that this object does not have a conscience. She is the force that gives these objects meaning, significance. At this point, she is conscious of her own self but not of Xavière: "each is indeed certain of its own self, but not of the other, and therefore its own self-certainty still has no truth" (Hegel, 1977, p. 113).

This passage about the jacket is not only a fictional idea. Reading Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, published in 1958, we also find analysis about existence and consciousness, which means that these kinds of reflections had been in Beauvoir's mind from earlier years.

Françoise's existential thoughts keep developing throughout the novel, but at the same time we can see how miserable she becomes. At the beginning, she provides a new life to Xavière, her protégé. Françoise offers for her to come and live in Paris, to pay for her bills, and to support her in whatever she wants to do with her life. This made Françoise happy and made her feel powerful because, like the theater, Xavière would not have a life if it was not for her.

Unfortunately, this situation changes; the power Françoise thought she had over Xavière turns out to be only economical. Xavière ends up taking other things from Françoise's life including her lover. At the beginning, Françoise agrees about sharing Xavière with Pierre and sharing Pierre with Xavière, but this situation ultimately makes her miserable.

During most of the novel, Françoise convinces Pierre that she feels good with this situation; she even says to him that "a closely united couple is something beautiful enough, but how much more wonderful are three persons who love each other with all their being" (Beauvoir, 1999, p. 210). It makes the reader question if this is true or if she is forcing herself to believe it.

Françoise and Xavière's relationship was more than a love/hate bond. At the beginning, Françoise feels good about it and, as I said, it made her feel powerful.

Whether she [Françoise] wanted or not, Xavière was bound to her by a bond stronger than hatred or love; Françoise was not her pray along with the rest, she was the very substance of her life, and all the moments of passion, of pleasure, of desire could not have existed without this firm web that supported them. Whatever happened to Xavière, happened through Françoise, and Xavière, whether she liked it or not, belong to her (Beauvoir, 1999, p. 251).

Here, Françoise has not yet achieved her self-conscience because according to Hegel (1977), "[...] for recognition proper the moment is lacking, that what the lord does to the other he also does to himself, and what the

bondsman does to himself he should also do to the other. The outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal" (p. 116).

This relationship continues to change and Françoise starts losing this power over Xavière.

She had begun to see everything through Xavière's eyes-places, people and Pierre's smiles. She had reached the point of no longer knowing herself, except through Xavière's feelings for her, and now she was trying to merge with Xavière. But in this hopeless effort she was only succeeding in destroying herself (Beauvoir, 1999, p. 292).

The narrator in the novel mainly tells the story from Françoise's point of view. In a couple chapters, the narrator takes the position of Elizabeth and Gerbert, but we never know the point-of-view or thoughts of Pierre and Xavière. We only learn Françoise's perspective. Then, through Françoise's own contemplations, we can see that even though she tells Pierre that she is happy with this relationship between the three of them, she actually feels miserable. She is full of jealousy but incapable of saying anything that would disturb Pierre's happiness. Françoise also behaves in a way in which she appears not to want to harm Xavière, but right after she recognizes that Xavière has a conscience like her, Françoise feels that she needs to choose between herself and the other. "One would have to kill Xavière" (1999, p. 302), she thinks.

"'It's because I discovered that she has a conscience like mine. Have you ever felt someone else's conscience in yourself?' Again she was trembling, the words were not releasing her. 'It's intolerable, you know'" (1999, p. 295). At this point, Françoise realizes that her conscience is not unique. She needed Xavière in order to acknowledge her own self, her own conscience.

It is possible to read this passage in the light of the Master-Slave Dialectic. In the novel, Françoise is the master and Xavière is the slave. According to Hegel, the slave is the object for the master, which makes the master think he is free. However, when the master realizes that the slave has a conscience like his, and that through this recognition is how he recognizes his self-conscience, he understands he is not as free as he thought he was because he is dependent on having the slave.

From this, we could say that Françoise felt she was independent, free and powerful because she was giving Xavière a life in Paris, giving her money and "freedom" to do whatever she wanted, and, at the same time, feeling that she owned her. This feeling did not last for long as Françoise realizes that her self-conscience depended on Xavière's. "For a long time Xavière had been only a fragment of Françoise's life, and suddenly she had become the only sovereign reality, and Françoise had no more consistency than a pale reflection" (1999, p. 291).

In almost the entire novel Françoise prioritizes the happiness of others instead of her own. She pleases Pierre and avoids disturbing him. She, for a long time, preferred Xavière instead of herself. But then, Françoise reaches

a point where she cannot handle it anymore; she needed to make a choice and chooses herself.

Françoise and Xavière had a strange relationship. At one point they hated each other, but at the same time needed each other in order to exist. The problem was that the only one who renounced her pre-eminence in order to have a friendship was Françoise (according to her). The relationship between Françoise and Pierre was different; there was reciprocation: "the moment you acknowledge my conscience, you know that I acknowledge one in you too, that makes all the difference" (1999, p. 301), says Françoise to Pierre.

Through the development of the novel, we can see that Françoise decides to tell Pierre how she feels and he decides to break up with Xavière. This, along with the fact that Françoise starts having a relationship with Gerbert, makes her think that she won the battle against Xavière: "I've won, thought Françoise triumphantly. Once again she existed alone, with no obstacle at the heart of her destiny. Confined within her illusory and empty world, Xavière was now but a futile, living pulsation" (1999, p. 375).

Françoise's thought about wining the battle against Xavière changes drastically. When Xavière reads Françoise's letters and realizes that Françoise also has a relationship with Gerbert, she feels devastated. Xavière thinks Françoise did it out of revenge: "You were jealous of me because Labrousse was in love with me. You made him loathe me, and to get better revenge, you took Gerbert from me. Keep him, he's yours. I won't deprive you from that little treasure" (1999, p. 400).

When Françoise hears these words, she faces this woman whom she did not recognize in herself. She feels ashamed of what she did even though she never accepts the fact that she did it to hurt Xavière. From this point she starts feeling the weight of guilt, and that was exactly what she could not handle. "Give me the chance not to feel odiously guilty" and "Spare me the remorse of having ruined your future" (1999, p. 403) are two of the phrases she says to Xavière. It is because she could not handle this sense of guilt that she decides to kill Xavière. She had to kill Xavière in order not to feel the heavy weight of causing sadness in another person, of hurting another conscience; in other words, to free herself of the guilt.

Françoise could not accept she was this kind of woman, and Xavière's being alive would be a reminder of what she did. For Françoise, the crime defined her, and as long as Xavière exists, this crime exists: "Xavière existed; the betrayal existed. My guilty face exists in the flesh. It will exist no longer" (1999, pp. 401-402).

Because of the way the novel ends, it is not very clear to the reader if Xavière is the only one who dies at the end because after Françoise pulled down the lever in Xavière's room, she goes to the kitchen and pulls down the lever there too.

[...] it was only necessary to pull down this lever to annihilate her. *Annihilate a conscience! How can I?* Françoise

thought. But how was it possible for a conscience not her own to exist? In that case, it was she who did not exist. She repeated, *She or I*, and pulled down the lever (1999, pp. 403-404).

Then she goes to her room, puts on her pajamas and stays in the house.

She undressed and put on her pajamas. *Tomorrow morning she will be dead*. She sat down, facing the darkened passage. Xavière was sleeping. With each minute her sleep was growing deeper. On the bed there still remained a living form, but it was already no one. There was no one any longer. Françoise was alone.

Alone. She has acted alone. As alone as in death. One day Pierre would know. But even he would only know her act from the outside. No one could condemn or absolve her. Her act was her own will which was being fulfilled, now nothing separated her from herself. She had chosen at last. She had chosen herself (1999, p. 404).

As we can see, it becomes unclear whom the narrator is talking about in the last paragraphs of the book. When the reader sees the word "she" in these paragraphs, it is hard to know if it is referring to Françoise or Xavière. It is as if at the end they were the same person, or two sides of the same person. Françoise never leaves the house, so the *she* that will be dead the next morning is also herself.

Hegel offers the Master-Slave Dialectic as a way to explain how humans relate to each other. This dialectic does not have only one way to go through. After the individuals involved in this kind of relationship recognize their own conscience in the other, a deadly fight starts: "in so far as the action of the other, each seeks the death of the other" (Hegel, 1977, p. 113). In order to survive, it is necessary to find a mid point where neither actually kills the other, and they both can keep the self-conscience. However, if one of them actually kills the other then he or she is also killing him or herself because each one's self-conscienceness depends on the other. Hegel (1977) explains this in the following way:

For just as life is the *natural* setting of consciousness, independence without absolute negativity, so death is the *natural* negation of consciousness, negation without independence, which thus remains without the requisite significance of recognition. Death certainly shows that each staked his life and held it of no account, both in himself and in the other; but that is not for those who underwent this struggle. They put an end to their consciousness in its alien setting of natural existence, that is to say, they put an end to themselves, and are done away with as *extremes* wanting to be for *themselves*, or to have an existence of their own (p. 114).

According to Hegel, there is also a point where this master-slave relationship turns around and the roles change: the master becomes the slave and the slave becomes the master. Then, François ended up being the slave depending on Xavière in order to exist, in order to have her self-conscience. After this realization, Françoise and Xavière start a deadly battle trying to find that mid point where both could co-exist. Near the end of the novel, Françoise says "I trail around with Xavière from morning till night. We do some cooking, fuss with our hair, listen to old records. We've never been so intimate. And I'm sure that she's never hated me more" (Beauvoir, 1999, p. 392).

This co-existence comes to a point where it is no longer possible. Xavière felt hurt and deceived. Françoise felt that she was becoming a woman she did not want to be. She also felt that the only way to run away from this feeling and crime was to eradicate her guilt and her conscience, which means that she needed to kill Xavière.

Françoise then succeeds in killing the other (Xavière), the actual death. However, by killing the other, through whom she can recognize herself, she is also killing herself. She is killing her own conscience. Françoise realizes the severity of the situation: "The whole meaning of my life is at stake" (1999, p. 301), which is why I think François is conscious of this relation and decides to kill Xavière to kill her own conscience. The book presents an actual act of murder, but I think it is also implying a suicide, since the narrator never says that Françoise leaves the house. The reader never really knows if they really die or not, but Françoise's intentions are a little more clear. She wants to kill her own conscience, and the only way to do it is by killing Xavière.

In conclusion, *She Came to Stay* is a novel not only about love, jealousy and a murder but also about existentialism. Beyond that, it is a novel that reflects the understanding that Simone de Beauvoir had on Hegel's ideas, or at least her own ideas on existence and dependency. The epigraph is telling us that there will be a murder, but what it does not tell us-or at least not right away-is that in order to kill someone else's conscience, it is necessary to kill one's own and also that our entire existence depends on the recognition of another conscience. This situation also implies that in order to kill our own conscience, it is necessary to kill that other through which we are able to recognize ourselves. Existence, in this sense, is only possible through the existence of an Other.

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