

2005

# Friendship Through Literature: Camus, Beauvoir, and Sartre

Ann Taylor, *bepress*

Ann Taylor

NASS Conference 2005

### **Friendship through Literature: Camus, Beauvoir, and Sartre**

“And that’s precisely where literature is useful-- to show the world to others as you yourself see it”

-Henri Perron, *The Mandarins*

What can one communicate in fiction that is impossible in other forms of literature? Fiction presents interesting possibilities- it allows for the embodiment of general ideas in particular lives and situations, and it allows one to tell the truth through the distortion of reality. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Mandarins* does both of these with respect to (among other things) the relationship between Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. What I do not want to do in this discussion of the novel is try to separate out what really happened historically and what was fictionalized. What I do want to do is to consider why Beauvoir might have wanted to capture the Sartre-Camus affair in a work of fiction.

There was something about existentialism that particularly lent itself to being embodied in fiction. Perhaps it was the extreme individualism inherent in the idea of freedom and choice; how can one speak in general terms of life when its course and meaning are specific to individuals and their choices, when there are not supposed to be any underlying absolutes to which one may cling? Fiction allows the embodiment of ideas in particular instances and lives, and in the many existentialist novels, plays, and short stories, readers can see the numerous ways in which choice in life is encountered and influenced by the specific situations of individuals. Thus, it seems that fiction is a particularly helpful tool in trying to explicate a way of seeing things which allows of no objective points of reference. In a sense, what fiction allows is for the reader to see the many different ways a particular theme or idea can manifest itself in individual behavior, while at the same time pointing out the commonality of those individual experiences-- in that they are all tied back to the same themes of human existence. One of the major ideas that comes up in *The Mandarins* is the problem of change, of being faced with a choice between two possibilities or

courses of action, and whether there is a middle path to take between the two when neither seems satisfactory.

This theme sheds light on the relationship between the main characters: Anne Debreuilh (Beauvoir), Robert Debreuilh (Sartre), and Henri Perron (Camus). They all face a dilemma (or more than one) and seek a third way out, but their individual choices with regard to these result in very different outcomes, thus changing their relationships with one another. The experiences and struggles of Anne occupy a prominent place in the novel and reveal much about love, the role of women, and political concerns-- her character should be no means be discounted or ignored. However, here I would like to focus on Robert Dubreuilh and Henri Perron as portrayed by Beauvoir. For Robert and Henri, this issue of being forced to choose comes up primarily with reference to the Cold War, just as it did for Sartre and Camus. With the end of World War II and the Resistance, both characters are forced to rethink the role of the intellectual in politics and to choose sides in the new power struggle-- between capitalism and communism, America and the Soviet Union. Neither Robert nor Henri is fully satisfied with the aims and methods of either of the two sides, yet they are being forced to choose one or the other. What is interesting here is not so much the choices that they make, but rather the illustration of the situation. We know what each chose, and the readers of this novel also would already have known (it was published in 1956), but knowing does not bring it alive and make it immediate. It does not give us insight into how each man may have thought about their choices, or their break. Beauvoir is able to show us this in fiction, which is quite different from telling about it in a letter or biography. Henri contemplates the break:

“Why?” he asked himself. “Why did we break it off?” He had often asked himself that question. Dubreuilh’s articles in *Vigilance* struck exactly the same note as Henri’s editorials. Actually, nothing separated them. And they had broken off. It was one of those facts which couldn’t be denied, but nothing could explain it. The Communists hated Henri, Lambert was leaving *L’Espoir*, Paula was insane, the world was rushing toward another war. The break with Dubreuilh made neither more nor less sense.

(Beauvoir, 497)

What the reader gets here is not necessarily what Camus actually thought (though it may have been), but an interpretation of what he may have thought-- possible feelings and reactions to the situation are manifested in an individual character, and we can see ourselves in that character.

The result is that the reader gets a more concrete sense of the lives and choices faced by individuals in post-Occupation France, specifically with regard to making impossible choices (rather than a general statement concerning how most people dealt with this new and frightening situation). Beauvoir doesn't tell us anything we don't already know; what she does do, however, is to make it more real, to allow us to identify with these characters, thus to partake of and learn from their mistakes and triumphs. She says something that is impossible to convey in any other way.

In having the personal and specific revealed, the reader is also allowed to see these highly celebrated public figures as actual human beings. Often celebrities are put up on a pedestal and expected to be everything that we wish we were. When they show themselves to be nothing more than human beings like the rest of us, we are disappointed and accuse them of not fulfilling their roles (and our desires). Anne says of Robert, "He who so much used to enjoy being in the thick of the crowd was now unable to prevent his name from creating a barrier between himself and others; everyone constantly, mercilessly made him remember it. And no one bothered about the man of flesh and blood Robert really was" (Beauvoir, 230). The story of the break between Sartre and Camus is told again and again; yet, it is difficult to see them as more than cardboard cutouts upon whom we impose our own opinions and desires. However, in *The Mandarins*, the reader is forced to recognize that those whom the public has idolized are no less human than the rest of us. In Henri and Robert, we see the struggles each experiences in trying to make decisions not only about political stances, but also about relationships, about difficult choices that must be made, about the courses and meanings of their lives. Henri thinks to himself, " 'This is not what I wanted!' he said to himself with a sudden feeling of despair, not knowing if he was thinking of Anne's tears, or of Lambert's mournful face, of Josette's disappointment, of his friends, of his enemies, of those who were absent, of that evening, of the past two years, or of his whole life" (Beauvoir, 393). Beauvoir has not told us more facts about Camus; she has shown us that he, like the rest of us, was nothing more than a human being whose friendships and loves and ego were just as fragile and shifting as our own, regardless of whether Camus himself ever thought this exact same thought. In this sense, the purpose of fictionalizing this particularly difficult postwar period, of fictionalizing the relationships between herself, Camus, and Sartre, is not only to entertain but to help the reader more closely identify with these figures and their struggles. The vague picture of life after World War II becomes

sharp and clear; we can see ourselves and our own experiences mirrored in these other individuals; and by seeing them as human beings, we can learn from their mistakes. What can we learn from someone who is perfect, who has no struggles of conscience, who never feels torn between two equally unacceptable situations?

One aspect of the novel which is difficult to comment upon, however, is the character of Robert, whom one would expect to be a central character, and about whom we would expect to learn quite a bit. Interestingly, the novel is told from two points of view: Anne's (in the first person), and not Robert's but Henri's (in the third person). In one way, this could indicate Robert (or Sartre, perhaps) as being in the middle, and Henri and Anne revolving around him; the reader gets information from the two people closest to him but not from himself, causing him to remain rather aloof and unknowable to a certain extent-- he still maintains an aura of being more-than-human, as the reader does not have the opportunity to know his most intimate thoughts and concerns. Yet, the focus of the novel is clearly on the lives of Anne and Henri, not on Robert. This is curious: one would expect that Beauvoir would know Sartre more intimately than Camus, and thus would be able to better write from Robert's point of view (or just about Robert in general) than from Henri's. But she doesn't. Is it because she perhaps knows Sartre too well, that his personality might overtake the novel, while using Henri would give her more freedom to pursue her own aims with the novel, since she did not know Camus as well? And why write from two points of view in the first place? Why would Beauvoir want to tell the story not just from Anne's point of view, but also from someone else's, specifically Henri's?

One possibility is that she wanted to depict aspects of the lives of the three of them, but that she was not a party to all of it. In the novel, Anne seems quite removed from the relationship between Henri and Robert; she hovers around the periphery without getting deeply involved in their friendship and its fluctuations. Yet somehow, it was important to Beauvoir, even if she did not portray herself as central to it. Why? Is it because the two of them somehow embody the essential conflict of the period? Because there is something she wants to reveal about their relationship that seems important? Or does she want to explore the same situation through different sets of eyes? Perhaps one clue lies in comments Henri makes in the novel about literature. As he is working on a current writing project, Henri thinks to himself,

"In a way, literature is truer than life... On paper, you say exactly and completely what you feel" ...You hate, you shout, you kill, you commit suicide; you carry things to the

very end. And that's why it's false. "Yes, it is false," he said to himself, "but it's damned satisfying. In life, you're constantly denying yourself, and others are always contradicting you... On paper, I make time stand still and I impose my convictions on the whole world; they become the only reality." (Beauvoir, 283)

Henri and Beauvoir are able to express what they truly want and think by committing to paper events and conversations that will never take place. One idea that this may indicate is that Beauvoir is intent upon hashing out the quarrel for herself; while Anne appears to be on the periphery of the friendship in the novel, the friendship still holds a prominent place in the story. Had it not been something that impacted Beauvoir to some extent, why would she spend so much of the novel discussing it? In several places, various characters state that they cannot understand the break: "...they had broken off...nothing could explain it" -Henri (Beauvoir, 497); "I really would have liked to have understood what had gone on in Henri's head. Robert's interpretations were too full of ill will" - Anne (Beauvoir, 429). Is this Beauvoir's way of trying to understand what happened, by fictionalizing it and attributing what motives, regrets, thoughts and actions she thought might have been present (or that she wanted to be present)? Often, in order to explain that which we do not understand, humans make up stories-- in a sense, then, perhaps this is nothing more than a modern mythology, a woman's attempt to understand and explain that which seemed to have no explanation. She didn't know, so she made something up. She needed Henri's point of view in order to fill in the blanks of what Anne herself would not have personally witnessed.

On the other hand, perhaps Beauvoir pays attention to the friendship and the break for another reason: she wants to comment on it in some way that she was unable to do in any other way. Again, showing the audience a situation rather than telling them about one is a very forceful way to make a point; plus, one can imagine that it was not easy for her to speak openly and truthfully about it when she had such a deep relationship with Sartre. Anne says in the novel, "When one is as close to a person as I am to Robert, to judge him is to betray him" (Beauvoir, p. 229). As Sartre's longtime companion and lover, Beauvoir probably felt a certain amount of loyalty to him and could not openly speak her true feelings or opinions about the situation, at least in public. So, as Henri says above, "On paper, you say exactly and completely what you feel" (Beauvoir, 283). Thus, the novel becomes a vehicle for Beauvoir to air her own opinions on the matter without revealing too much. In this case, she may or may not have known

the complete story and the substance of the private conversations between Sartre and Camus (though of course she was well aware of the public saga of 1952); I'm not convinced that it matters to what extent she is historically accurate in telling the story. Rather, she sees their particular case and then fictionalizes it, adds in details, and fills out the thoughts and conversations on the matter, so that she can emphasize a general point inspired by a single case, or by her perception of a single case. Again, she needs Henri's point of view to show what Anne could not have witnessed, and therefore give the reader a more complete picture.

If this second possibility is indeed the case, the question must then be asked, what is it that she wishes the reader to take from this? Although it is in no way spelled out, some guesses would be that she is trying to portray the difficulty of the situation, the stress to which the friendship was subjected by external forces (what Bill will call the "world-historical pressure"), or the idea that there did not seem to be a right answer, yet everyone was forced to try to find one. When we examine one of the arguments between Henri and Robert, it becomes evident that both characters have very strong arguments for their positions: "...compared to the concept, reality is always wrong; as soon as a concept is embodied, it becomes deformed. But the superiority of the Soviet Union over all other possible socialism is that it exists.' Henri looked questioningly at Dubreuilh. 'If what exists is always right, there's nothing left to do but fold your arms and sit back.' 'Not at all. Reality isn't frozen...It has possibilities, a future. But to act on it-- and even to think about it-- you've got to get inside it and stop playing around with little dreams.'" (Beauvoir, 584). There are numerous other instances where Henri and Robert eloquently defend their respective positions to each other and to their acquaintances. The reader becomes aware that as much as the Cold War was made out to be a black and white situation, the reality of it was that it was much more complicated. The complexity of the situation along with the pressure to choose one side or the other put enormous stress on the friendship. That, along with their celebrity status, caused it to break-- their political quarrel became a media sensation.

Along with this, Beauvoir emphasizes repeatedly in the novel how the two are similar-- despite what become vastly different political ideologies. "Dubreuilh's articles in *Vigilance* struck exactly the same note as Henri's editorials. Actually, nothing separated them" (Beauvoir, 497);

" 'It's really absurd that our attitude accentuates only our differences when so many things draw us together'" (Beauvoir, 512); " 'When you come right down to it, he's more or less in the same

position as you: both of you are at odds with the whole world''' (Beauvoir, 434). The point is repeated that they are, in a sense, two of a kind, but that circumstances broke them apart. And in *The Mandarins*, the two friends make up and reunite, launching a new project together and reentering the political struggle. The comment seems to be that the political is personal, but should it be? To what extent must we sacrifice the personal in order to pursue the political? Should we ever? And is it irreparable if it does happen? But if Beauvoir, like Anne, was not as much a part of the friendship as Camus and Sartre were, how does she have the right, or the knowledge, to comment? Her distance from the situation was the very thing needed; she had a perspective on it that Sartre and Camus could not because they were so deeply involved. She was able to portray what she could not say, and what they could not see, through fiction-- she tells the truth by lying.

Fiction allows a writer to say certain things, to make certain points, with greater ease and greater impact than that allowed by other forms of writing. Beauvoir, in *The Mandarins*, has the opportunity to make real to the reader a concrete situation in postwar France. The reader is faced with individual characters with personalities, desires, and doubts unique to them, and thus different reactions to and opinions about the specific situations. Instead of generalizations about the French intellectuals of the Resistance, we become acquainted with individuals, thus connecting us to them in a way that is not possible when we only speak in generalizations. We can identify with their struggles and desires-- we can recognize these same things within ourselves and know that our situation, either personally or in a more general sense, is not unique. In addition, Beauvoir is able to explore questions about the friendship between Sartre and Camus with a certain amount of freedom not granted when one speaks openly about those with whom one is intimate. The break was a major event in all of their lives; to whom else could Beauvoir speak honestly about it besides her readers and herself? How else could she fully explore and reveal it to her readers than through fiction?



## **Works Cited**

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Mandarins*. Trans. Leonard M. Friedman. New York: The World Publishing Company, 1956.