# The Second Sex, Chapter 14 The Independent Woman

## Simone de Beauvoir, 1949

#### Quotes in order of occurrence with turnings/reversals in italics

she affirms herself concretely as subject in her projects

This world has always belonged to men and still retains the form they have imprinted on it.

However, for a woman to accomplish her femininity she is required to be object and prey; that is, she must renounce her claims as a sovereign subject. This is the conflict that singularly characterises the situation of the emancipated woman.

*I refuse to be object and prey*

*I do not renounce my claims as a sovereign subject*

she will waste time on shopping and dress fittings, and such.

*I will not waste my time on shopping and dress fittings and such*

she tries to deny her intelligence as an ageing woman tries to deny her age

*I do not deny my intelligence... or my age*

as soon as she feels awkward, she gets fed up with her servility; she tries to take her revenge by playing the game with masculine weapons

*I do not take my revenge by playing the game with masculine weapons*

By the very fact that she is in thrall to outside preoccupations, she does not commit herself entirely to her enterprise; thus she profits from it less, and is more tempted to give it up.

*I commit myself entirely to my enterprise*

Because of this defeatist attitude, the woman easily settles for a mediocre success; she does not dare to aim higher.

*I do not settle for a mediocre success. I dare to aim higher.*

The greatest failure a lack of self-assurance brings about is that the subject cannot forget himself. He does not generously aim for a goal: he tries to prove he is worth what is demanded of him.

*I generously aim for a goal*

Throwing oneself boldly towards goals risks setbacks: but one also attains unexpected results; prudence necessarily leads to mediocrity.

*I throw myself boldly towards goals, and thereby risk setbacks.*

she lacks the audacity to break through the ceiling, she does not passionately lose herself in her projects; she still considers her life an immanent enterprise: she aims not for an object, but through an object for her subjective success.

*I do not lack audacity to break through the ceiling*

*I passionately lose myself in my projects*

*I aim for an object rather than my subjective success*

to attach too much importance to minor failures and modest successes

*I do not attach too much importance to minor failures and modest successes*

To do great things, today’s woman needs above all forgetfulness of self: but to forget oneself one must first be solidly sure that one has already found oneself.

*I am solidly sure that I have already found myself*

through artistic expression they seek to go beyond the very given they constitute:

*I go beyond the given*

she will go beyond the given in the way she expresses it, she will really be an artist, a creator who gives meaning to her life by lending meaning to the world.

she rarely envisages art as serious work

*I envisage art as serious work*

she will not compel herself to acquire a solid technique; she balks at the thankless and solitary trials and errors of work that is never exhibited, that has to be destroyed and done over again a hundred times; and as from childhood she was taught to cheat in order to please, she hopes to get by with a few ruses. This is what Marie Bashkirtseff admits.

*I acquire technique. I do not balk at the thankless solitary trials and errors of work that is never exhibited, that has to be destroyed and done over again a hundred times. I do not cheat or hope to get by with a few ruses.*

The woman easily plays at working but she does not work; believing in the magic virtues of passivity, she confuses conjurations and acts, symbolic gestures and effective behaviour

*I work*

instead of constituting their work by a thoughtful effort, they put their confidence in spontaneity

*I constitute my work by a thoughtful effort. I do not put my confidence in spontaniety.*

timid, they are discouraged by the least criticism

*I am not discouraged by the least criticism*

they often overreact, which is harmful to themselves: they become irritated and discouraged when recognising their errors rather than drawing valuable lessons from them.

*I do not often overreact. I do not become* *irritated and discouraged when recognising my errors. I draw valuable lessons from them.*

Her sterile vanity comes from the fact that she cherishes herself without daring to construct herself.

*I dare to construct myself (and cherish myself)*

Not being able to forget oneself is a failure that will weigh on them more heavily than in any other career; if their essential goal is an abstract self-affirmation, the formal satisfaction of success, they will not abandon themselves to the contemplation of the world: they will be incapable of creating it anew.

*I* *abandon myself to the contemplation of the world: I am capable of creating it anew.*

Instead of giving herself generously to the work she undertakes, the woman all too often considers it a simple ornament of her life.

*I give myself generously to the work I undertake*

involved in nothing but self-contemplation, she eliminates herself

*I do not eliminate myself*

they do not dare the bold flights of a Gérard de Nerval

*I dare bold flights*

she lacks the courage to displease even more as a writer.

*I have the courage to displease*

the woman watches her manners; she does not dare to irritate, explore, explode; she thinks she has to excuse her literary pretensions by her modesty and good taste; she relies on the proven values of conformism

*I dare to irritate, explore, explode.*

*I do not rely on the proven values of conformism*

she cannot be counted on to blaze new trails.

*I can be counted on to blaze new trails*

she will do her best to stifle an originality she distrusts

*I will not stifle my originality; I trust it*

she will make herself repudiate everything in her that is ‘different’. There are women who are mad and there are women of talent: none of them has this madness in talent called genius.

*I will not repudiate everything in me that is ‘different’.*

*I have this madness on talent called genius*

This reasonable modesty

*I disown this reasonable modesty*

No woman has ever thrown prudence to the wind to try to emerge beyond the given world.

*I throw prudence to the wind to try to emerge beyond the given world.*

they extol the bourgeois ideal of happiness and disguise their class interests under the banner of poetry; they orchestrate the mystification intended to persuade women to ‘remain women’; old houses, parks and kitchen gardens, picturesque grandparents, mischievous children, laundry, jams and jellies, family gatherings, clothes, salons, balls, suffering but exemplary wives, the beauty of devotion and sacrifice, small disappointments and great joys of conjugal love, dreams of youth, mature resignation – women novelists from England, France, America, Canada and Scandinavia have exploited these themes to the utmost; they have attained glory and wealth but have not enriched our vision of the world.

*I refuse to orchestrate the mystification intended to persuade women to ‘remain women’*

*I enrich our vision of the world*

to adopt, in front of the whole world, the disinterested attitude that opens up wider horizons. When they pull away the veils of illusion and lies, they think they have done enough: nonetheless, this negative daring still leaves us with an enigma; for truth itself is ambiguity, depth, mystery: after its presence is acknowledged, it must be thought, re-created. It is all well and good not to be duped: but this is where it all begins

*I adopt in front of the whole world, the disinterested attitude that opens up wider horizons.*

*truth itself is ambiguity, depth, mystery: I acknowledge the presence of this enigma, and then I rethink it, re-create it.*

the woman exhausts her courage in dissipating mirages and she stops in fear at the threshold of reality.

*I dissipate mirages and do not exhaust my courage - I do not stop in fear at the threshold of reality*

We women are still too preoccupied with seeing clearly to try to penetrate other shadows beyond that clarity.

*I penetrate other shadows beyond clarity*

‘Women never go beyond the pretext’

*I go beyond the pretext*

very rare are those who approach nature in its inhuman freedom, who try to decipher its foreign meanings and lose themselves in order to unite with this other presence:

*I approach nature in its inhuman freedom, try to decipher its foreign meanings and lose myself in order to unite with this other presence*

the women who have traversed the given in search of its secret dimension:

*I traverse the given in search of its secret dimension*

This explains why their works generally lack metaphysical resonance and black humour as well; they do not set the world apart, they do not question it, they do not denounce its contradictions: they take it seriously.

*I set the world apart. I question it. I denounce its contradictions. I take it seriously.*

Destiny is not what limits her: it is easy to understand why it has not been possible for her to reach the highest summits, and why it will perhaps not be possible for some time. Art, literature and philosophy are attempts to found the world anew on a human freedom:

one must first unequivocally posit oneself as a freedom.

*I posit myself as a freedom*

when the struggle to claim a place in this world gets too rough, there can be no question of tearing oneself away from it; one must first emerge within it in sovereign solitude if one wants to try to grasp it anew:

*when the struggle to claim a place in this world gets too rough, there can be no question of tearing myself away from it; I emerge within it in sovereign solitude to try to grasp it anew*

what woman primarily lacks is learning from the practice of abandonment and transcendence, in anguish and pride.

*I learn from the practice of abandonment and transcendence, in anguish and pride*

‘Her wings are clipped.’

*My wings are not clipped*

the spirit with all its riches must project itself in an empty sky that is its to fill

*I project my spirit with all its riches in an empty sky that is its to fill*

She may feel alone within the world: she never stands up in front of it, unique and sovereign.

*I may feel alone within the world: I stand up in front of it, unique and sovereign.*

it is rare for a woman to fully assume the agonising tête-à-tête with the given world. The constraints that surround her and the whole tradition that weighs on her keep her from feeling responsible for the universe: this is the profound reason for her mediocrity.

*I fully assume the agonising tête-à-tête with the given world*

*I feel responsible for the universe*

...those who tried to work out the fate of all humanity in their particular lives. No woman has thought herself authorised to do that.

*I think myself authorised to work out the fate of all humanity in my particular life*

only then will woman be able to make her history, her problems, her doubts and her hopes those of humanity; only then will she be able to attempt to discover in her life and her works all of reality and not only her own person. As long as she still has to fight to become a human being, she cannot be a creator.

*I make my history, my problems, my doubts and my hopes those of humanity*

*I attempt to discover in my life and my works all of reality*

*I can be a creator*