Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction” in *The Second Sex*

Study Guide

* Why is it false to define a woman as “womb”? What are the implications of defining women in this way?
* How does Beauvoir respond to those women who hold a nominalist view of what woman is, that is, the idea that woman is woman in name only; we should all be regarded as human beings? What is wrong with this view?
* What does the fact that Beauvoir poses the question “what is a woman” imply? Why would a man never write a book about the peculiar situation of the human male?
* What is the dichotomy, or duality, of the Self (or the One) and the Other? How do these categories of understanding the world get formed? What is dangerous about seeing the world through these categories?
* How does Beauvoir analyze the reciprocal relationship between men and women historically?
* Explain the quote she gives from Poulain de la Barre: “All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit.” How does this explain male domination and female subordination, in her view? Do you agree? Do you think this idea applies to other traditionally marginalized groups? Why or why not?
* Beauvoir identifies one of the methods used by the dominant group in society to justify the inferiority of the Other—Woman as Other, African-American as Other, Jew as Other. Explain the fallacy she finds in such reasoning and how it leads to a vicious circle.
* What is wrong with trying to talk about the inferiority, superiority, and equality of people? How does Beauvoir propose getting out of the “rut” of arguing for the superiority, inferiority, or equality of different groups?
* At the end of the introduction, what is she calling “absolute evil”? Why?
* What makes Beauvoir’s feminism existentialist?