

Materials to Guide Reading

LECTURE TEN

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* does have a variety of implications but the text itself is not problematic and so I have appended only two questions. The first six questions concern Simone de Beauvoir's introduction to her book, "The Second Sex":

1. De Beauvoir says that the terms "masculine" and "feminine" are not symmetrical. "Man" represents mankind, whole and entire, whereas "woman" represents some limited, particular feature of mankind. "The fact of being a man is no peculiarity." The masculine body is thought of by a man, she says, as natural in its connection to the world, whereas a man regards the body of a woman as a hindrance, lacking a normative relation to sensible experience. True?

2. De Beauvoir gives an exposition of "the Other" as an essential element of any group's consciousness of itself. She says that a group can only think of itself, can define itself, by setting up "an Other", a representative idea of what is not a member of itself. True? Does each group have its own "Other"? Can you identify the notion of "the Other" against which management defines itself?

3. Each "Other", as de Beauvoir defines the term, is an actual group, not just a vague, undifferentiated "everyone-but-us". And each "Other", she adds, can also think of itself as "We". But women, she argues, cannot think of themselves as "We". Are her reasons supporting this opinion valid? If women have no ethnic identity, should they try to create one?

4. An implication not drawn by de Beauvoir, but suggested by her essay: if women are to be able to say "we", they must be able to acquire a sense of a common and unique political identity. Hence, the validity of calling for so-called "redressive" legislation and "redressive" practices. The community that kept women from the labor-force and from the professions must now make amends for its prejudicial treatment of the group thought of as "Other" by slackening its announced ideal of fairness and give members of that group an edge in claiming the goods administered by that community. In particular, it should license preferential hiring of women at the expense of fairness to men--at least, for a time. What do you see as the pro's and con's of this position?

5. How accurately does de Beauvoir's analysis of the category of "the Other" apply to the situation of Nora and Torvald in Ibsen's "A Doll's House". Is the relationship of Otherness reciprocal or one-sided--Nora is Torvald's Other but not vice-versa?

6. Nora says that her father and her husband have done her a terrible wrong. What is the nature of that wrong? Can it be generalised to apply to the position of other subordinate groups in our society? Nora responds to Torvald's outburst about her unfitness to raise children not by justifying her actions (they were necessary to save his life, etc.) but by accepting the judgment and making it a reason for abandoning her family. Many have held that this gesture proves Torvald's case: however bad Torvald's outburst, it does not justify her abandoning her duties to her husband and children. This was a sticking-point with Ibsen, who held all his life that duties to oneself took precedence over other important values.