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Becoming Woman: Consciousness of Condition

From birth, to live as a woman, person of color, or any individual from a marginalized group in society *requires* a consciousness of possessing a multi-layered identity. To some degree, all people must view themselves in context to their community, their culture, and the greater society in which they exist. However, for some groups, in particular, women, sense of self has historically been embedded in their relationship to figures outside of themselves. So much that, a consciousness of an identity independent from others is a radical act. It may not *seem* so radical, as contemporary American society has essentially concluded that women are of equal standing to men; however, this folly is rooted in an ignorance of the multi-dimensional character and societal “code-switching” that is required by women on a daily basis.

Simone de Beauvoir once famously said: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”. This then begs the question: What does it mean to be a woman? Ask any woman and the answers will vary. However, it is likely they will all have one thing in common: they will be culturally or societally dictated characteristics; to be nurturing, graceful, empathetic, accommodating… the list goes on… More importantly, it is unlikely they will overlap with answers from the same women when asked: What does it mean to be Man (not to be confused with “what does it mean to be *a* man?”)? Certainly being a woman and of Mankind are not mutually exclusive existences and yet they are interpreted so differently.

On the most basic level, women’s conception of self is not-inherently negative. More importantly, much of what woman defines herself as internally and privately is absent of gender-normativity. This is more easily observable in young girls who, although are already influenced by external pressures, share much in common with their male counterparts. However, as girls enter adolescence a consciousness develops of the context in which they are viewed by nearly all figures in their life, not simply as an individual, but as a woman. It is here that the second layer of identity begins to materialize, as society’s influence dictates not necessarily woman’s internal identity, but certainly the ways in which she must shape herself based on situational circumstances. For example, young women are constantly reminded of their perceived or societally expected sexuality, particularly when put in contrasting situations. As a girl enters adolescence she will often experience initiation into the sexual realm of society through projections by older men. This she will compare to the seemingly inattentive behavior of her male peers, and as a result, develop a consciousness of the lens through which she is viewed, as a woman, by external figures; none of which reflect the internal identity she has developed thus far in her life. By the time she is a young adult, not only will she possess an understanding of self that is reflective of what she believes to be her true nature, but a second level of identity that blends her individuality with what it is she is expected to be by society—regardless of whether or not she finds this philosophically distasteful. Furthermore, the way in which a woman interacts with other women differs from her interaction with men, just as it differs in a mixed group of the two. This is a result of an awareness of the context in which the opposing group is viewing her. The severity of change in these interactions is based on her consciousness of and comfort with this multi-layered understanding of self. This same principle applies to race and class dynamics as well.

Equally as important as addressing woman’s conception of herself is an examination of man’s awareness of his own condition. Every single existentialist philosopher we have read this term is white man. Again, as with women, there is nothing inherently negative about this existence. However, to disregard how white, male, and class privilege informs their work is ignorant. When Jean-Paul Sartre declares: “man first of all exists, encounters himself…and defines himself afterwards… He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself” (Existentialism is a Humanism 2b), he speaks from a reality that does not limit one based on preconceived notions of their identity. To him, he is Man. He is the basis of all thought— rational, spiritual, or otherwise. He is *not* suspected to be less than capable of this, because at his birth he has provided no indication of “inferiority”.

For women or people of color, the cards are stacked differently, societally constructed potential and notion of self is inexorably linked to the very fact that they differ in some way from the white man. This is not to discredit existentialist thought. Much is to be said for personal responsibility and Kierkegaard’s “That Individual”. However, to ignore the variation in lived human experience and society’s capacity to influence how particular groups of people understand what it is that has driven their acts of will—whether that is culture, gender, age, race, class, etc.—is to limit what may be expressed as the human condition itself.

As previously noted, this level of consciousness of condition begins to develop early on for girls, particularly around adolescence. At such a young age it is difficult to fully conceptualize the complexity of one’s identity; for many girls this causes confusion and often, insecurity. Harry Haller of Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* illustrates this inner-conflict well; constantly experiencing the societal “code-switching” between man and wolf. Not only does this stifle his psychological and spiritual growth, but it produces immense self-doubt and despair over his condition. Women, too, often experience unease with this multi-faceted identity as it is heavily influenced by external factors and expectations. This does not speak to an innate incapacity to develop a deepened exploration of self, but rather the age and conditions under which girls are universally required to address such a complex understanding of identity.

Among the powerful, beautiful, and poignant expressions of what it is to be woman, I find myself time and time again returning to one by Sylvia Plath: “Being born a woman is my awful tragedy… Yes, my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, bar room regulars - to be a part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording - all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. Yet, God, I want to talk to everybody I can as deeply as I can. I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night...” The tragedy of womanhood lies in the fact that society does not regard it as worthy of the same respect as manhood, as there continues to be a disconnect between femininity and humanity. Possibly this is because, to this day, religious rhetoric and symbolism are subtly ingrained in nearly all aspects of modern life. Or perhaps it is due to the fact that the white man, who still dominates western society, is not forced to acknowledge the complexity of his condition, as he still believes he is the basis of the human condition itself. Regardless, as a young woman, the consciousness I must carry of that very fact does not diminish my capacity to think and act independently. What it does, is inform my choices further, as I am *aware* of what influences who I am and who intend to be.