CONFRONTING THE OTHER IN SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S "THE AGE OF DISCRETION"

Alexandra Roxana MĂRGINEAN*

Abstract: *The analysis of* "The Age of Discretion" *by Simone de Beauvoir inevitably brings along the subject of age and aging. We start from a glimpse at the protagonist, a professor having reached the last decades of her life, at her thoughts and feelings in a moment when she acknowledges, besides her condition of an elderly person, now made official, the multiple crises she is experiencing on all the planes of her existence. Hence, the estrangement that ensues occasions the mechanism of othering that she applies indiscriminately to individuals, situations, statuses and even her own person. Our scrutiny is also into potential solutions and/or answers available to the narrator, trying to ascertain whether the character is able to find or make peace with herself, the others and destiny in the end.*

Keywords: *old age, identity, other.*

This paper looks at the short story *The Age of Discretion* by Simone de Beauvoir, which is part of the volume entitled *The Woman Destroyed*. All the stories making up this work deal with drama and crisis in women's lives and their struggles to overcome them. The particular piece that we are interested in here is approached from the lens of awareness of old age and everything that this entails. The narrator considers and reconsiders her position in relation with herself, her career and the people around her whom she cares about and even loves. She is revisiting her attitudes towards life and individuality, forced by crisis that creeps into her life uninvited and unawares, as she denies reading any early signs that announce it. The collapse of familiarity in all aspects of the protagonist's life forces her to reconsider things, a reconsideration that can now be neither denied nor delayed any longer.

A professor, whose name we do not find out until the end of the story, although we know the names of the other characters (the message being, perhaps, her representativeness for a group or type), talks about her thoughts and feelings at the dusk of her life and career. Nothing much happens, the everydayness and perhaps triteness of the events pointing once again to their common nature. When she becomes upset with her son, Philippe, as he lets her know he has decided to give up his doctoral studies and take up the opportunity of a post in the Ministry of Culture, offered by his father-in-law, she feels betrayed in her convictions and accuses her son of mercantilism. Hence, she intends to cut all ties with him, forbidding even her husband André to meet with Philippe; when he disobeys, she is ready to reject him too. Moreover, the crises of estrangement already existing between herself and her husband and between her and Philippe get worse as her new book turns out to be a failure.

We will analyze here the multiple others that the narrator interacts with or tries to manage. To that purpose, a better understanding of her personality is required, so we will begin by going into detail in analyzing her attitudes, thoughts and feelings, as well as the characterizations she is offered by the ones who are close to her. When Philippe calls her convictions senile obstinacies during their conversation over the phone (De Beauvoir, 2014: 30), she becomes adamant in cutting all ties with him and attempts to

* Romanian-American University; alexandra.marginean05@yahoo.com

BDD-A29945 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:57:01 UTC)

impose the same approach of the situation to her husband. She is absolutely furious when she finds out that André has seen her son despite her opposition. As Philippe tries to reach her through a letter, she sends it back to him unread. Her daughter-in-law's endeavor to play the peace messenger, as she pays her a visit subsequent to the fight, meets the same unyielding attitude. The protagonist resorts to extreme gestures and feelings, like cleaning up her son's closet and saying she does not want to see him ever again.

All these point to a certain rigidity and stubbornness that may vex the reader, perhaps all the more so in a woman her age, seeming childish and less than wise. Her own husband, who is particularly calm, rational and reasonable, calls her reaction exaggerated, and her, a person unable to admit to her own mistakes (De Beauvoir, *op. cit.*: 38). Irene finds her severity silly (*ibidem*: 34). Philippe is not afraid of bigger words, also due to his angry state of mind, calling her tyrannical, heartless, a power monger for whom love has to be deserved, in other words, incapable of offering unconditional love (*ibidem*: 49). Her controlling nature is also pointed out by Irene, who notices that the woman's pretentions mean making her son sacrifice his future and live according to her ideas instead of his own (*ibidem*: 33). Moreover, she advertises her ideas on this theme freely, when saying that a child becomes what his parents make him – "Devine ceea ce îl fac părinţii lui" (*ibidem*: 38).

Irene touches upon another point in reasoning with the protagonist, revealing another of the latter's personality features – elitism and self-righteousness: "Presupun că viaţa dumneavostră a fost întotdeauna impecabilă şi că asta vă îndreptăţeşte şi să-i judecaţi pe toţi de sus" (*ibidem*: 34). The announced traits are visible in the professor's detestation of the bourgeoisie, seen as "putred de bogaţi, influenţi, importanţi" (*ibidem*: 26), and in her statements regarding her view of knowledge as mania, passion, neurosis (*ibidem*: 25) which may point to intellectual elitism. Along the same line, she reads betrayal of one's principles in her son's abandoning the career of a professor, be it one of scarce financial means, in favor of a materially advantageous one of a business man, which she sees as not only less noble, but downright shameful. We detect a tinge of snobbery and pretention of aristocracy in her views. Besides betraying the principles of quality and status, Philippe's choice also steers away from his mother's political preferences, which makes it even worse. When she claims she cannot love somebody whom she does not respect, her haughtiness and airs of superiority come to the fore once more (*ibidem*: 66).

From all of the above we realize who are the first characters that are "othered" in the protagonist's marked and progressive estrangement from them: Philippe, Irene, André. Her husband is her other primarily through his personality, which seems to oppose his wife's. He is calm, reasonable, pacifistic, logical, avoiding conflict and the making of harsh decisions on the spur of the moment. His wisdom is obvious in some critical moments in the advice he gives to the protagonist. In an attempt to clear the air between his wife and Irene and make the former reconsider her aversion towards her daughter-in-law, he says Irene could not be so materialistic after all since, in marrying Philippe, she has not had anything to gain in this respect, as he is not rich; he also points out that, when one loves somebody, one should give some credit to the people whom that somebody loves as well (*ibidem*: 26). Other instances where André's logic surfaces are his pinpointing abilities in the interpretation of his wife's actions and reactions. He proves to be a subtle observer when he says her obsession with moral standards is in fact the experiencing of a sense of betrayal on an emotional plane (*ibidem*: 66). He places her identification with a moral stand not into the sphere of a thirst for justice, as

BDD-A29945 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:57:01 UTC)

she implicitly claims it to be, but in that of intransigence and betrayed expectations, so not in something having to do with rectitude and objectivity, but with emotionality and subjectivity, perhaps with an incapacity to forgive and/or an emotional void/vacuum. André is also a compassionate man, as one thing he believes in (perhaps one of the few that remain, for him) is a continuous – even when deemed futile – struggle for the eradication of human suffering (De Beauvoir, *op. cit.*: 68). With the statement of this conviction he manages to catch his wife's attention and regain her respect (which he had partly lost, as she thought he neither cared for nor believed in anything any longer). When she becomes close to him again, she gains some perspective on her tense relationship with her son. André is a good influence, a soothing one, and someone who brings clarity by his sympathetic and loving attitude. This change he effects in his wife also proves him right as far as her acting nastily on account of her emotional wounds rather than moral inflexibility.

Philippe is also positioned by his mother as her other, because she feels abandoned by him: he has chosen a wife she does not like, he has strayed away from the path of an academic career that his mother would have deemed more respectable and he does not share her political views. The professor drastically states that he abandoned her at the moment of his birth: "M-a părăsit în momentul în care m-a anunțat că se căsătorește; de când s-a născut: o doică m-ar fi putut înlocui" (*ibidem*: 27). From the narrator's perspective, Irene is a representative of the money-oriented bourgeoisie and the woman who has come to influence her son more than her. The professor uses adjectives like snob and modern to characterize her (*ibidem*: 19), hinting that she may be a cold woman who in reality cares for nothing (*ibidem*: 20), in other words, just the professor's opposite (who gets very passionate about her ideas, as we have seen). Even Manette, André's mother, sees things very differently from her. To Manette old age is something she relishes: she listens to the radio, does gardening and attends party meetings; also, she never gets bored and refuses to get a TV set because she is reluctant to let just anybody into her home (*ibidem*: 61); her life philosophy is that one has to exist for something, to have something to believe in (*ibidem*: 64). After the failure of her new material, the professor is discouraged and pessimistic about everything and feels that she is very different from Manette as well.

Failure is something that is "other" to the professor, and she initially fails to come to terms with it. From her attitude and words, we realize that this is all the more difficult since she has not really felt it before in her life. Other reasons why her failure is more difficult to accept are: the fact that it comes at a more advanced age, the way it pairs with other crises in her life, its unexpectedness and, last but not least, the way it seems to insinuate on more planes: professional, emotional and existential/philosophical.

On some occasions, the body comes to the character-narrator's attention, and the way she speaks about it makes us realize that it is itself experienced as an "other". At her age, which we suspect is around sixty, she describes some changes in her wardrobe. Firstly, she noticed the way all clothes seemed either too joyful and daring, or too sad when she turned fifty, so she found herself in the impossibility of deciding what is suitable, which was a new feeling, something she had never experienced before (*ibidem*: 17). Secondly, these days she realizes that the way she relates to clothes has changed from another point of view as well: she has lost the pleasure of wearing something – what she calls her intimate and tender relationship with her own clothes (*ibidem*).

BDD-A29945 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:57:01 UTC)

Moreover, she realized one day, in surprise, that she had gained weight, something she had never imagined would happen to her. Her body turned unexpectedly into an uncontrollable, disobeying, terrorizing body of excess and the "abject" (Brook, 1999: 14-5). She experiences the misrecognition of her own body: "Cu cât mă recunosc mai puțin în corpul meu, cu atât mă simt mai obligată să mă ocup de el" (De Beauvoir, *op. cit.*: 17). The first misrecognition of one's body occurs at the age of infancy, i.e. that which Lacan speaks of as the "mirror stage", accompanied by a change of self-awareness (Lacan, 1949). It reoccurs at old age in a different form, when it also announces a change of awareness and self-conceptualization – in other words, a change of identity, as the person alters her perception of self and the world, as well as the relation with the world. If Lacan's eight-month infant cannot fathom the idea that his own self can display the kind of integrity and harmony that he sees in the mirror (as he has no clear image of self, which is therefore to him dispersed and incoherent), the elderly individual who sees a deformed body in the mirror suffers a reverse feeling. (S)he cannot understand why the mirror no longer renders the unitary and harmonious whole that (s)he has in her/his mind about her/his own person.

Nevertheless, in both cases the effect is the same: there is a lack of correspondence between two perceptions, which leads to misrecognition and anxiety. However, the professor's reaction to her changing body is not defeat, but a (successful) attempt to tame it back into its usual shape. She needs to level the two perceptions to regain unity of self and do away with confusion and anxiety. She needs to recuperate from the mirror a satisfactory image that would reassure her, regarding both the integrity of her self or its endurance/survival, and power over her destiny and the restoration of a feeling of order or making sense of reality. She is aware of the modern trend of (excessive?) care for one's body and aligns her attitudes to it, managing to make peace with her body and have a friendly relationship with it. Nevertheless, her estrangement towards it is visible in her urge to personify it, as if it were both alive and someone having its own will, so potentially disobeying and threatening: "îl îngrijesc cu un devotament plictisit, ca pe un vechi prieten ușor căzut în dizgrație, puțin slăbit și care are nevoie de mine" (De Beauvoir, *op. cit.*: 17-18).

What is worth noticing is that, even though the professor's reaction is overall an ambition to regain her old body shape and size, she does not obsess over this process. Her self-respect and psychological balance do not depend on whether she will be successful or not. Her attitude when she acknowledges her physical decay is not alarm or depression, but, rather, mild nostalgia and a dose of healthy humor. In case she were not able to re-become fit, she would not be affected, psychologically speaking, in a significant way, which makes us think of her approach to matters as a coping strategy of the stigmatized, namely "'psychological disengagement', whereby stigmatized individuals disengage their self-esteem from their outcomes […] and 'disidentification' whereby stigmatized individuals cease to value these domains" (Zebrowitz, Montepare, 2000: 351).

The narrator's mindfulness of the modern trend of taking a little too much care of one's body (Turner, 1995: 19-24) is witnessed in Irene as well. Irene is described as a blonde elegant woman having too wide a forehead, grey-blue eyes and a soft mouth (De Beauvoir, *op. cit.*: 19). The professor underlines the fact that she has nothing ostentatious or in bad taste, then goes on with the physical description: the delicacy of her ears and nose, beauty of her complexion, the dark blue of her lashes. André deems her beautiful and his wife often thinks of her when she sees smartly dressed women in the fashion magazines. The fact that Irene is dedicated a whole page for her physical

BDD-A29945 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:57:01 UTC)

traits is illustrative of how "other" the professor feels Irene to be. She understands the way Irene is, but cannot help having mixed feelings for this type of woman, which, on the other hand, she judges negatively for and through the very same features that she apparently appreciates in her. Hence, the professor thinks that this appearance points to a woman who takes care of herself but is otherwise snobbish, cold, selfish and indomitable, a person who makes her shudder, "să-mi înghețe sângele în vine" (De Beauvoir, *op. cit.*: 20). The fact that the narrator infers these character traits solely from and in connection with the other's smart appearance proves that she rejects and resents this type on some level. There is some indication that Irene's dress is rather on the austere and conservative side. Her attire, a bit "lamb dressed as mutton", inspires to the professor her ambivalent attitude towards her daughter-in-law: she likes Irene's conservatism, but it makes her shudder and think of an intention to manipulate and impress, which is in agreement with Alison Lurie's observations on the young dressing older, one of the critic's interpretations of this reality being the desire to be "more authoritative" (Lurie, 1981).

Old age is visible, of course, in one's appearance, but not only in that. Part of the physical markers characterizing the elderly, i.e. their "distinctive physical qualities" (Zebrowitz, Montepare, *op. cit.*: 337), habitual twitches and gestures may also point to old age as a state of mind. A rather comical description of the way in which André intently shows his elderliness through these pinpoints just how much one's body may tell about the psyche. A year before, when he had found out he was hypertensive, he used to take his pulse every ten minutes. Lately, the narrator notices that he has taken the habit of touching his gum and pressing his cheek with his thumb: "Continua să-și țină degetul pe obraz, avea ochii goi, făcea pe bătrânelul, până la urmă mă va convinge că e cu adevărat unul" (De Beauvoir, *op. cit.*: 27). André plays the role of old age, of an old man, and his gestures and body help him send this message and build this identity before his wife.

The body is the vehicle of sexual ties as well. The narrator draws our attention to the subtle, intense communication taking place between two people connected through this type of tie by admitting she has underestimated its importance and by confessing the impression that overlooking it equals the loss of a sense and of insight: "Numeam serenitate această indiferență; deodată, am înțeles-o altfel: este o infirmitate, ca pierderea unui simț; mă face să devin oarbă […]" (*ibidem*: 23). It is as if not being aware of this tie, of this process, and not sharing it, i.e. being in a couple who no longer enjoys it, means losing the sharpness of one's mind. Understanding is impaired by lack of awareness of the sexual in its physicality. The narrator feels that she is missing something on how her son Philippe can be manipulated so well by Irene because she does not know anything about their sexual relationship: "Ar trebui să le știu nopțile" (*ibidem*). It is an eloquent example of how something missing in the sphere of the bodily affects, in the sense of damages, one's mind, personality, identity.

The central focus of the story is the activation and discovery of the other within that old age is. The main characteristic of old age, which is brilliantly suggested in the construction of the narrative and of the narrator's progression of thoughts and feelings, is that it insinuates into one's life slowly. At the beginning, the professor seems to possess a good, balanced mind and attitude towards her age, whereas her husband does not. In her view, André has lost his joie de vivre, displaying a defeatist, despondent attitude, and is marked by an inability to create or discover anything anymore, as his latest sterile period in research, which he is struggling to overcome, has already lasted fifteen years – the longest ever – and is yet to be over. She markedly emphasizes the

BDD-A29945 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:57:01 UTC)

differences of approach between them. She still has faith in him and his research, but feels incapable of inspiring it to him (*ibidem*: 12). She is still amused by quite a number of things and is interested in and in the mood for cultural visits and events, unlike him, whom she has to drag to a movie or to an exhibition (De Beauvoir, *op. cit.*: 13). There is a subtle tinge of blame that she assigns to him, as she feels his lack of enthusiasm about everything makes her feel her own age more poignantly (*ibidem*: 14).

At this point in the story she is more or less overtly accusative of André, seeing the weakness of the elderly in his every gesture or attitude. Subsequent to her fight with Philippe, when André dissociates from her by taking an indulgent stance, she considers his angle a death of the spirit and feebleness: "Îmbătrânise. Nu mai acorda aceeași importanță lucrurilor. […] Sensibilitatea, discursul lui s-au tocit. […] Acestei inerții a inimii i se spune indulgență, înțelepciune: dar este moartea care se instalează înăuntrul tău." (*ibidem*: 37) During this time, while she has a confident, combative attitude, as she does not feel overwhelmed by her age yet, she does not understand what the elderly lose, and says it to André exactly like this, as she is prone to look at the full half of the cup of life (*ibidem*: 43). When André retorts "youth", "stamina" to her question concerning what is lost, she still does not get it, saying youth is not an asset in itself (*ibidem*).

However, since awareness of old age insinuates slowly, as we have said, at the beginning there are a few comments made by the professor that unveil the imminence of this change of perspective, from optimism to pessimism. The dusk of life creeps up on the main character, clutching her existence in its cold grasp. The first comments made on the condition of being old are light, seemingly bearing little weight. Old age announces itself by a change of perspective on things. The same, familiar surroundings – the green space in the middle of Edgar Quinet boulevard (*ibidem*: 9) – are seen with different eyes, they seem more vibrant and colorful, perhaps as there is an underlying fear that one might not see them for much longer, which brings to her a new appreciation of these. She tends to be subjective about people's age, as all appear to be young – for instance, her middle-aged, forty-year old, Ph.D. student Martine (*ibidem*: 15) and she remembers a time when people her age seemed old to her, namely her mother-in-law, Manette (*ibidem*: 58). Also, the amount of one's spare time is suddenly frightening, there is a tendency to fill one's leisure moments with activities, as passivity becomes unbearable (*ibidem*: 10). Advanced technology makes the professor acutely aware of how much time she has spent on earth. That is why she tries to remember, unsuccessfully, when the first refrigerator appeared (*ibidem*: 11), or why she wonders what some historical personalities must have felt like in their time while faced with technological advancements – Andersen, aged sixty (her age) must have been amazed at crossing Sweden in less than twenty-four hours (*ibidem*: 14). Then, there appears a tendency to seek the company of the young, or keep the pace with modern times and their feel. The narrator affirms that the perpetual youth of the world keeps her in shape (*ibidem*). Also, a young person around helps one cope with aging better; the narrator accompanies her son to social events – the Le Mans race, op-art exhibitions etc., as she feels part of his youthfulness (*ibidem*: 24).

We realize towards the middle of the short story that she rejects André's wretchedness because she has that in her and is afraid it will get activated, which it does, after the failure of her book. It is like a mutual, double transfer has taken place: she has embraced that otherness that is bitter about everything, while André has taken over the role of the optimist in their relationship. What appears as merely a swap of roles and attitudes is actually her allowing herself to be prey to her own hidden buried

BDD-A29945 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:57:01 UTC)

fears, her defeat before the ugly, desperate other within. So, it is not so much a borrowing or emulation of André, as it is a prevalence of this other represented by old age and the prospect of death.

The professor ends up embracing this other she is afraid of and she positions herself at the opposite pole of optimism. Her gloom seems to surpass André's, her comments become dismal. Old age means the end of the unpredictable – in the positive understanding of the word – in one's life (De Beauvoir, *op. cit.*: 24). Sometimes she refuses to get up from bed and face the day in the morning, or wakes up in restlessness and anguish after falling asleep inadvertently, as if consciousness hesitates to reincarnate and become aware of life (*ibidem*: 50). These are the symptoms of depression, when resuming one's life seems burdensome. She notices she cries less and less for the departed (*ibidem*: 64). The narrator gets to the point where she states her feelings about aging outright, without any euphemisms: aging means routine, grumpiness, decrepitude; she feels well preserved but at the same time finished (*ibidem*: 54). She is under the impression that every year goes by quicklier than the previous one and there is little time left before going to sleep forever (*ibidem*: 60). She comes to share the perspective of thinkers like Fitzgerald, who saw life as a process of decay (*ibidem*: 62) or Sainte Beuve who thought that during his life, the individual never actually becomes mature or illuminated in the true sense of these words, but some parts of him toughen and others become degraded (*ibidem*: 63). There is obviously a different standpoint from the one the narrator has begun with.

References

Brook, Barbara. *Feminist Perspectives on the Body*. London: Longman, 1999. Print.

De Beauvoir, Simone. "Vârsta discreției". *Femeia sfâșiată (nuvele)*. Translated by Anca Milu-Vaidesegan. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2014. Print.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". *Écrits, A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Associated Book Publishers (UK) Ltd., 1949. pp. 502-509. Print.

Lurie, Alison. *The Language of Clothes*. New York: Random House, 1981. Print.

Turner, Brian S. "Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body". Ed. Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner. *The Body. Social Process and Cultural Theory*. London: Sage Publications, 1995. pp. 1-35. Print.

Zebrowitz, Leslie A. and Joann M. Montepare. "'Too Young, Too Old': Stigmatizing Adolescents and Elders" in Heatherton, T.; Kleck, R.; Hull, J. G. (Eds.). *Stigma*. New York: Guilford Publications, 2000. pp. 334-373. Print.

BDD-A29945 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:57:01 UTC)