

# Love, happiness, and other antonyms: the role of women in marriage



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Throughout the course of history, marriage as an institution has changed drastically, weaving in and out of various phases and forms. What began as a purely reproductive relationship evolved into an emotional companionship. Or has it? Does marriage equal happiness? Is happiness love, or vice versa? What is a woman without a man? Author Simone de Beauvoir both asks and works to answer the age-old question of love, happiness, marriage, and perhaps concludes the inability of the three. Using the text “Second Sex”, the play Medea, and the film White Material, it can be concluded that marriage is, perhaps, nothing more than a word.

In Beauvoir’s piece “Second Sex”, she makes a distinct differentiation between love and happiness and between the roles of the male and the female in a marriage. Happiness, according to Beauvoir, is what is “promised” to the bride: a calm, repetitive “equilibrium” from which she cannot yet does not wish to escape. She is meant to be the “manager”, remaining within the walls of her home, constructing for herself a life of happiness. Thus, we can conclude that the woman does not love her life as a wife, but it makes her happy. She has “no choice but to build a stable life where the present, prolonging the past, escapes the threats of tomorrow, that is, precisely to create a happiness.” The woman is stuck in this perpetual “immanence”, a word Beauvoir uses to contrast the male duty of “transcendence.” She claims woman’s existence is only validated by man.

This idea of security through marriage is evaluated and verified by the play Medea. Medea’s entire life unravels when she is left by Jason for another, younger, woman. She claims she was the perfect wife: “I even bore you sons just to be discarded for a new bride. Had you been childless, this craving for  
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another bedmate might have been forgiven” (60). Here, Medea confirms Beauvoir’s stance that a woman is only valuable when a man gives her value: in this instance, her fertility is what gives her position as wife meaning. Yet it still is not enough for Jason, who, as the male, is meant to “prosper” – according to Beauvoir, to “produce, fight, create, progress.” The Nurse claims that Medea is “Jason’s perfect foil, being in marriage that saving thing: a wife who does not go against her man” (1). Medea, as Beauvoir would put it, is queen of the hive “within her domain”, relying on her husband for significance.

In the film *White Material*, main character Maria Vial is divorced from her husband yet married, in a way, to her plantation. The plantation itself is owned by her ex-father-in-law yet she still works as a manager. As Beauvoir states, the woman is meant to fulfill this exact position: “within the walls of her home she will be in charge of managing, she will enclose the world; she will perpetuate the human existence into the future.” Therefore, the woman is meant to oversee, but never to own; in Maria’s case, she perceived the plantation to be hers yet never truly owned it, evident, clearly, when it was sold to the Mayor by her father-in-law. Maria refuses to give up her life on the plantation, where everything is regular and routine. She cannot bear the thought of leaving her home and returning to France.

To both characters, marriage, whether to a person or a thing, is their salvation. For Medea her marriage is her security; later in the play, she begs the king Aegeus for help. She says, “Aegeus, I beg you...by these knees I clasp...let me come to Athens, shelter me, accept me in your home” (123).

She is helpless without her husband. In the film we see Maria’s mental state <https://assignbuster.com/love-happiness-and-other-antonyms-the-role-of-women-in-marriage/>

deteriorate quickly in the final few scenes, resulting in the murder of her ex-father-in-law. She ends up alone, her family deceased, her plantation bought out, and her general validity of existence extinguished. In the film, the Mayor offers a solution to Maria: why not go to France? Why not leave the stresses behind and go to France? Yet she refuses, claiming she could not “ show courage in France.” Likewise, the chorus in Medea provides a voice of guidance, ensuring Medea that a husband leaving his wife is nothing out of the ordinary: “ If your husband has gone to adore a new bride in his bed, why, this has often happened before. Do not harrow your soul. For Zeus will succor your cause. What use to lessen your life with grief for a lost lord?” (123). The chorus, however, has no effect on Medea. Though they tell her not to fret over such a common occurrence, she quickly has them swayed to her side. So we must ask, why is the desire for marriage so strong?

In the time of Medea, marriage was the ultimate partnership, yet it was unsanctified. Marriages rarely equated to fidelity and even more uncommonly meant happiness or love. Medea was meant to produce sons for Jason. In the film, Maria’s divorce from her husband leaves them estranged. Maria and her ex-husband handle the plantation differently. Likewise, they handle their son differently; Andre worries about Manuel while Maria laughs off his sporadic and concerning behavior. It seems that the general separation from male figures leaves the female characters weaker and more helpless than they would have been with them. Marriage is barely a state of being for these women, but rather, a rite of passage, an action, or a duty. It is a necessity. In their moments of solitary desperation, they might have been saved by the institution of marriage. Or, perhaps, just the promise

of companionship from anyone could have saved the women from their detrimental isolation.

## **Works Cited**

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