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“I’ll risk you, if you’ll risk me”: The Ambiguity of Human Existence and Relationships in Marilyn Duckworth’s *Married Alive*

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse Marilyn Duckworth’s *Married Alive* within the framework of Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophy of ambiguity, risk and reciprocal recognition. It is argued that the New Zealand writer represents human relationships both as a potential threat to one’s subjectivity, conceptualising them in terms of conflict and competition, and a necessity that may enrich both parties. What is celebrated in the novel as the key to establishing a mutually rewarding bond is the wilful acceptance of risk and reciprocal recognition of oneself and the lover as both subject and object.

Discussing the context for the emergence of existential philosophy, William Barrett reflects as follows: “It appears that man is willing to learn about himself only after some disaster; [...]. What he learns has always been there, lying beneath the surface of even the best-functioning societies” (35). Just as the seismic upheavals of the twentieth century drove philosophers to contemplate the absurdity of the human condition, so, too, an epidemic of insanity that sweeps across near-future New Zealand in the wake of flu vaccine contamination awakens the 40-year-old female protagonist of Marilyn Duckworth’s *Married Alive* (1985) to her existential ambiguity. Faced with an ever-present threat, Francie develops a heightened awareness of herself as both subject and object, living and approaching death, and, most crucially, separate from and connected to other people. She also comes to realise the strained dynamics of interhuman relationships, which are simultaneously a necessity and a possibly lethal menace, with infected people acting in an unpredictably violent manner. As the plot unfolds, it transpires, in line with Barrett’s remark, that the epidemic not so much generates but rather exposes and exacerbates the deeply rooted anxieties: “Only in some Polynesian circles does the family system continue rebelliously, resulting in deaths from violence, bizarre injuries to every part of the body. This is the price of love today. Was it ever different?” (Duckworth 1985, 14).

The conflictual nature of interhuman relationships viewed as an existential problem has been a thematic staple of Duckworth's fiction since her literary debut in 1959: "In my writing as well as in my life I've been occupied by the tension between needing love and needing independence. [...] The paradox I've aimed to explore is that love, which is as necessary as the air we breathe, can also be the very thing that suffocates. It is a human dilemma [...]" (Duckworth 2000, 291). This preoccupation with the challenging task of striking a balance between personal freedom and engagement with other people, coupled with an emphasis on the ambiguity of the human condition, resonates strongly with existential philosophy, in particular the thought of Simone de Beauvoir. Indeed, Dale Benson argues that Duckworth's novels are rich with existentialist overtones, not as a result of the writer's informed philosophical interests, but rather as a reflection of the *Zeitgeist* (207). Accordingly, in her brief analysis of *Married Alive*, the scholar indicates that the novel is characterised by the typically existentialist focus on the overlap between the human need for "self-reliance" and that for community (Benson 224).

Apt as Benson's insights are, they still lack grounding in specific philosophical concepts. The aim of this paper is thus to supplant them and bring to more precise expression by drawing close parallels between the novel and de Beauvoir's philosophy. In what follows it will be claimed that, just as de Beauvoir, Duckworth sees interhuman relationships as a potential threat to individual subjectivity, conceptualising them in terms of conflict and competition. Nonetheless, to avoid this threat by choosing isolation or oppression over companionship, as the characters of *Married Alive* are prone to do, is to fall into bad faith and constrain one's own self-fulfilment. In order to establish a rewarding bond, both parties should recognise their mutual vulnerability and embrace risk, an endeavour that may be accomplished only through their concerted effort. The second section of this paper will adumbrate those aspects of de Beauvoir's thought that are germane to the subject at hand. The third section will examine the existential condition of the female protagonist, focusing on its multidimensional ambiguity. The final section will dwell, for one thing, on the risks involved in interhuman relationships and, for another, on the ideal of reciprocal recognition as represented in the novel.

1. Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Ambiguity, Risk and Reciprocal Recognition

In her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir locates the core of the human condition in ambiguity, whereby one is simultaneously "a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects" (1948,7) and "an object for others" (1948, 7). This fundamental tension finds its most striking manifestation in the experience of the body. On the one hand, the body constitutes a living subject endowed with a capacity to transcend itself; it mediates between human consciousness and the

external reality, being "our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects" (de Beauvoir 2011, 68). On the other hand, in its material and biological dimension, the body is also "an immanent object" (Cataldi 86) and pure facticity over which one has only limited control. As such, it wavers between interiority and exteriority, simultaneously belonging and not belonging to oneself. An autonomous and self-contained entity, each person is thus at the same time inextricably connected to the world at large, a paradox that takes central place in de Beauvoir's thought: "An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existants can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all" (1948, 18).

Human beings, however, are reluctant, if not downright unwilling, to acknowledge their existential ambiguity (de Beauvoir 2011, 859), wherein lies the root of interpersonal hostility. Since the awareness of being not only an autonomous subject but also a mere object inevitably gives rise to anxiety, each individual seeks to conceal his or her true condition at the cost of other people, regarded as "a threat and a danger" (de Beauvoir 2011, 113). Accordingly, drawing on Hegel's master-slave dialectic, de Beauvoir describes interhuman relationships as a site of struggle for domination: "each consciousness seeks to posit itself alone as a sovereign subject. Each one tries to accomplish itself by reducing the other to slavery" (2011, 193). It should be emphasised, however, that her approach is markedly less conflict-oriented than that presented by other existentialist philosophers, most notably Jean Paul Sartre (Deutscher 44). While he focuses on how one is irremediably thwarted by the other in the exercise of freedom and the maintenance of undivided subjectivity, de Beauvoir accords equal significance to the contribution that every foreign consciousness brings into one's life, endowing it with meaning and substance (1948, 71). More than that, in her philosophy, the other becomes a condition *sine qua non* for one's potential as a human being to be fully realised: "Thus, we see that no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others" (de Beauvoir 1948, 67).

Crucially also, in contrast to her lifetime partner, de Beauvoir makes a strong case for the possibility of surpassing the state of mutual enmity (Gothlin 137). What is required is the "free recognition of each individual in the other, each one positing both itself and the other as object and as subject in a reciprocal movement" (de Beauvoir 2011, 193). It is the reciprocal recognition of oneself and the other as ambiguous and free that forms the foundation of an "authentic love" and guarantees mutual self-fulfilment: "neither [lover] would abdicate his transcendence, they would not mutilate themselves; [...]. For each of them, love would be revelation of self and the enrichment of universe" (de Beauvoir 2011, 798). The sphere that, according to de Beauvoir, lends itself best to this project is eroticism. In sexual intercourse, each party naturally experiences himself or herself as a subject that desires and an object that is desired by the lover (de Beauvoir 2011, 476), and, most importantly, this experience elicits a sense of relish, rather

than anguish. This is not to say, however, that de Beauvoir provides a utopian vision of a harmonious community where each person would eagerly forego all egoistic inclinations. Being aware of the flawed human nature, the philosopher emphasises that the ideal of reciprocal recognition calls for a tremendous commitment and effort from both lovers, and, even if these are offered, it will still elude full grasp: “But friendship and generosity [...] are not easy virtues; they are undoubtedly man’s highest accomplishments; this is where he is in his truth: but this truth is a struggle endlessly begun, endlessly abolished” (de Beauvoir 2011, 193). Consequently, any encounter with the other must inevitably imply a threat to one’s subjectivity. But since isolation precludes authentic freedom, the only ethical stance to be adopted is to face the risk and its implications, bearing in mind that “if there were not the risk of loss, there would not be salvation either” (de Beauvoir 2011, 281).

2. Epidemic of Ambiguity

Duckworth’s novel opens with a somewhat curious, yet telling, scene that sets the tone for the whole novel and introduces a number of existentialist concerns that form its thematic texture:

She [Francie] stands straight and naked in the cubicle, with her knicker over her head [...]. Although they are freshly laundered knicker there is a crotchty smell. Her own smell? Or a legacy from earlier customers? [...]. Yesterday she came close to killing a customer [...]. A suntan cubicle is like “coffin lid.” If she kept her thumb on the control button she could make herself into a neat jam sandwich. (1985, 7)

First, the quoted opening clearly foregrounds the heroine’s corporeality, with a particular emphasis on its ambiguous dimension. By examining the smell of her private parts, Francie posits her body in the double role of a sensing and experiencing subject and a passive object that comes under scrutiny from an external perspective. Her nakedness seems to underscore the latter status, implying the vulnerability and immanence of flesh. Further, with the woman’s smell being hardly distinguishable from that of her clients, the boundaries between herself and the other collapse. Paradoxically thus, neatly isolated from the external world in a locked suntan cubicle, the heroine remains connected with it. As Francie thinks about the woman that she has nearly burnt alive through her own negligence, what also comes to the fore is the threatening character of any encounter with the other. Moreover, the recollection of the near fatal accident juxtaposes the heroine’s lived experience against a lurking sense of mortality or, as de Beauvoir would have it, a painful awareness that “every living moment is a sliding toward death” (1948, 127). The tragicomic tone used to describe this episode, in turn, underlines the banality of death as a commonplace element of human existence.

The dimensions of human ambiguity mentioned above – body as subject/object, self/other, and life/death – manifest themselves most strikingly in the epidemic of insanity that takes a heavy toll on the population of New Zealand. Since the contaminated flu vaccine may cause serious mental disturbances, assuming “an acute form of schizophrenia” (Duckworth 1985, 8), people no longer put any faith in their mind and make it the linchpin of their identity. The protagonist is persistently accompanied by an ontological uncertainty, doubting her own sanity and intentions: “Has she gone mad and attempted murder? [...]. It is perfectly possible that Francie is mad” (Duckworth 1985, 8). Increasingly wary of the reliability of the mind as an epistemological tool, the heroine becomes instead alerted to the significance of her body. On the one hand, it is the body that is privileged throughout the novel as a conscious subject that mediates Francie’s emotions, as evidenced by the following excerpt, in which anxiety is conceptualised in terms of a physical feeling: “the bored loneliness, edged with fear – a sensation which fills her veins like an illness [...]” (Duckworth 1985, 87). On the other hand, the heroine lives her body also as “a thing of the world” (de Beauvoir 2011, 44), hence a site of immersion in immanence and an object exposed to the judgment of other people. In her *Second Sex*, de Beauvoir reflects on how women feel alienated from their bodies at various stages of their lives, most painfully during adolescence with its substantial physical changes, which weigh heavily upon a girl’s self-comfort: “Her whole body is experienced as embarrassment” (399). In a similar vein, Francie reminisces about perceiving her teenage body as grotesque, misshapen, and repulsive to the point of eliciting the hostility of her father: “She would sit and think [...], trying to discover where was the flaw in her that had turned her father so against her. At puberty she decided it was her womanness, her female odours and curves” (Duckworth 1985, 11). She remembers also how the experience of the body as something external and inimical to herself assumed dramatic proportions after labour, when the uncontrollable bodily movements deprived her of subjectivity and reduced her to an animal-like state: “Her breasts stung. Her womb went into post-labour contraction, unfairly reminding her of the little lathery animal she had expelled with such a sense of relief. And now there was more pain, lodged somewhere inaccessible, like a toothache [...]” (Duckworth 1985, 15).

As in various novels by de Beauvoir (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 58), in *Married Alive* subject/object ambiguity is brought to the fore also with the recurring motif of the protagonist looking at herself in the mirror. Contemplating her own image, Francie is both the perceiver and the perceived, while her body simultaneously functions as an active subject and undergoes objectification under the woman’s self-reflective gaze. To invoke de Beauvoir, this is also the moment when the distinction between subject and object breaks down, as the heroine identifies with her own reflection: “the woman, knowing she is and making herself object, really believes she is seeing *herself* in the mirror: passive and given, the reflection is

like a thing herself" (2011, 758). In Duckworth's novel, however, gazing in the mirror not only highlights subject/object ambiguity but also incites the heroine to ponder her existential condition: "She [...] catches sight of herself in plastic mirror. [...] While she watches, a sneeze convulses the muscles of her face. The mirror rocks on its nails. She laughs, reaching out to steady her moving image. How little it takes to put things out of kilter" (Duckworth 1985, 25). Far from joyous, the woman's laughter expresses rather her anxiety about the precariousness and changeability of life – "the unbearable lightness of being," to use Milan Kundera's phrase – that she literarily faces at the sight of the swaying mirror.

Indeed, with the strange epidemic raging through the country, no certainties and fixities are any longer in place: "Sudden irrational behaviour, radical character changes, these are a commonplace" (Duckworth 1985, 9). Not only does Francie lose the sense of stability, but she also becomes increasingly aware of her own fragility and mortality, especially with the reminders of death all around her, just to mention again the coffin-like suntan cubicle or a blood-soaked bird in its last throes that the heroine sees by a roadway. The sense of impending death comes to culmination after Francie escapes with her lover, Sidney, from plague-ridden Wellington to his country cottage, which resembles a Gothic-like dilapidated house, "stinking of death" (Duckworth 1985, 49), even more so when the heroine discovers that the man is hiding the corpse of his ex-wife, to whom Francie bears an uncanny resemblance, and the house is haunted by a ghost.

The enhanced awareness of mortality is closely bound up with the problem of human interconnectedness, considering that the survival or doom of each individual becomes contingent upon the actions of other people. Intent upon saving their lives, New Zealanders isolate themselves from one another, afraid of marrying, establishing families or forming communities: "We live in a society now of every man for himself" (Duckworth 1985, 34). At the same time, their forced separation results in the need for closeness with other people resurfacing with an even greater force, compared by the heroine to a primeval instinct: "She despises herself for feeling so abjectly in need. She thought she had done away with those obsolete responses in herself" (Duckworth 1985, 35). This paradox is illustrated most strikingly by a scene in which various characters, all located in different places, are yet visibly bound to one another. Ellen, the heroine's friend, goes on a date with Francie's former paramour "as revenge for her friend's desertion" (Duckworth 1985 76). Francie's daughter, whom she put up for adoption immediately after birth, "is conceiving an illegitimate son" (Duckworth 1985, 76), thereby unconsciously following in her mother's footsteps. Despite physical isolation, their lives are not shaped in vacuum, but inevitably in relation to one another, as de Beauvoir would hold: "Thus, every man has to do with other men" (1948, 74). What binds them together is also their common existential condition. The threats of the epidemic spare no one, as signalled by the recurring image of a mental hospital or the building of the government, which triggered the calamity

by its policy of forced vaccination. Most importantly, death always lies in wait, as Francie's daughter "[walks] on the lawn cemetery where the ashes of Sidney's bossy parents repose" and "a woman who died as the result of a sunbed accident is being ritually lowered into the ground" (Duckworth 1985, 76–77). The scene may be best summarised by de Beauvoir's contention that "man, mankind, the universe, are, in Sartre's expression, 'detotalized totalities,' that is separation does not exclude relation, nor vice versa" (1948, 122).

3. Between Hostility and Reciprocal Recognition

Just as in de Beauvoir's philosophy, in the dystopian world of *Married Alive*, interhuman relationships are predicated on patterns of conflict, domination and subordination. Deranged people succumb to unpredictable and uncontrolled aggression, posing a lethal threat to one another. The fact that the mental illness caused by the contaminated vaccine may initially develop asymptotically gives ample room for mutual suspicion and magnifies the atmosphere of fear. The need for closeness that lingers despite the danger, in turn, is described in terms of hunting and survival, where the lovers act respectively as a prey and a predator: "Others erupt from their single dwellings suddenly and unexpectedly, like trapdoor spiders, looking for their ration of love. Snatch and retreat" (Duckworth 1985, 14). Interestingly also, sex, which has pride of place in de Beauvoir's writings as the most fruitful ground for alleviating mutual hostility, stands in the novel unalterably as a source of peril, associated by Francie primarily with infection and unwanted pregnancy: "Such statements have become a common ploy during courting rituals along with 'I've had a vasectomy' or 'I might have become impotent'" (Duckworth 1985, 33).

As mentioned earlier, however, Duckworth consistently emphasises that hostility is intrinsically inscribed in interhuman relationships, and what the epidemic does is only to bring it to light and render it more tangible: "The injuries of love until now have remained decently internal. [...] Now they blossom on cheek and brow, in scars and bruises" (Duckworth 1985, 14). Furthermore, it should be noted that the sense of threat is by no means limited to romantic liaisons, but creeps also into other relationships, most notably motherhood, which involves a violent invasion upon the heroine's subjectivity: "She recognized even then that motherhood was a lethal condition – lethal to relationships, career, self" (Duckworth 1985, 15). That antagonism is not merely an outcome of the epidemic is confirmed also by the events following Francie's departure from the city with her lover. Enticed by Sidney's assurances that he did not take the vaccine, she decides to go to his cottage to shield herself from the horrors of the epidemic. Their escape, however, fails to offer the desired protection, proving instead the complexity and persistence of the problem. In her lover's residence, their relationship transforms into a struggle

for power, in which the stronger party seeks to dominate and deprive the other of subjectivity. “Win or lose. Is it a game, or a battle?” – this is the question that Francie asks herself, starting to view their relationship in terms of a competition (Duckworth 1985, 108).

Her marriage with Sidney initially constitutes an act of defiance in a world where establishing close ties with one another is strongly discouraged in view of its possibly dangerous effects. Although it seems to spell a hope for a new future in the midst of disaster, the wedding ceremony introduces a sinister atmosphere, with the insane clerk pronouncing the couple “dust to dust” (Duckworth 1985, 96). Not only does this curious slip of the tongue once again underscore the finiteness of human life but it also draws a clear parallel between marriage and death, one that figures prominently in de Beauvoir’s philosophy. Taking Hegel’s famous dictum that “each consciousness seeks the death of the other” as a point of departure, the French philosopher explains that every relationship diminishes our sense of uniqueness and supremacy over the world, thereby constituting a symbolic death (de Beauvoir 1948, 70). This is especially the case with marriage, which “incites man to a capricious imperialism” (de Beauvoir 2011, 566), and, while placing far more stringent limits upon women, in fact “constitutes an oppression that both spouses feel in different ways” (de Beauvoir 2011, 589). Not surprisingly, then, the undercurrent of uneasiness continues after the ceremony. Driving in a car, the newly-weds are suddenly gripped by a hysterical laughter, anxious about their new situation. Completely alone and bound by their wedding oath, each of them has to face the threatening presence of the partner. To make matters even worse, the heroine quickly realises that the role of wife implies surrendering a part of her own self and stands in contradiction to her feminist aspirations: “She, Francie, the strong one, buttering his toast, quaking at his step, submitting to his whims. Worst of all, wife. Ludicrous. Shameful. She has become a traitor to her sex” (Duckworth 1985, 114). Marriage becomes for Francie a trap that freezes her in immanence: “What is marriage? Fixed moves, as in a chess game. Rules and expectation. [...] Marriage is self-imposed limits on freedom” (Duckworth 1985, 100).

The threats that loom over interpersonal relationships elicit two types of responses from most of the characters, both of which may be castigated as manifestations of bad faith: isolation and oppression. Although isolation protects New Zealanders against physical harm, it deprives them of humanity. There is no longer any place for “family feeling, trust and loyalty – even love perhaps” (Duckworth 1985, 20). Treating other people as things “to be referred to only when necessary” (Duckworth 1985, 20) is a way to preserve one’s robust sense of self but simultaneously a hinderance to the realisation of personal freedom in the understanding of de Beauvoir. Following the example of her compatriots, Francie initially rejects any connection with other people and creates an illusion of self-sufficiency, which is a flawed, yet natural reaction: “One can understand that men who are aware of the risks and the inevitable element of failure involved in any

engagement in the world attempt to fulfil themselves outside of the world" (de Beauvoir 1948, 67–68). The woman is clearly afraid of facing her own existential ambiguity: "Francie likes to keep the compartments of her life well separated" (Duckworth 1985, 20). The avoidance of close confrontation with other people allows her to assuage the anguish of seeing herself as an object, while the escape from Wellington is essentially a flight from the burden of responsibility involved in engagement with the external world.

The latter attitude, in turn, is embodied primarily by Sydney, who seeks to subjugate, or even annihilate, those who pose a threat to his subjectivity, as most strikingly evidenced by the man's murder of his first wife, whom he views as a "witch" invading upon his mind (Duckworth 1985, 73). Just as the master in the Hegelian dialectic, the man refuses to recognise Francie as a human being in her own right, turning her into a thing without essential reality: "The feeling he gives her of not being there, of having no physical presence for him. She is a spirit without substance or identity" (Duckworth 1985, 38). This tendency becomes conspicuous in a curious scene where Sidney forces Francie to dance before his very eyes, thereby making her an object of his gaze, an act that escalates into brutal oppression when Sydney suddenly "trips her up" (Duckworth 1985, 101). The couple's sex is depicted in a similar vein as hunting, where Sidney assumes the role of an animal ready to kill his prey: "Sidney rolls off her and pats his large stomach as if he had just devoured her" (Duckworth 1985, 49). The continuing attempts on Francie's part to render their intimate relations a site of mutual understanding and solidarity fail because her lover treats them in a purely mechanistic way, asserting his supremacy over the woman. Sidney thereby deals the most serious blow to the ideal of generosity advocated by de Beauvoir: "an individual should never seek the triumph of pride or the exaltation of his self in erotic relations; [...] it is essential to break the barriers of the ego, transcend the very limits of consciousness, and renounce all personal sovereignty" (2011, 272).

It should be noted, however, that, unlikeable as Sidney is as a patriarchal tyrant, Francie also displays bad faith in a twofold way. First, she becomes complicit in her own oppression by allowing Sidney to objectify her. Instead of facing the nothingness at the core of her existence, the heroine strives to find solace in an illusion of a stable and ready-made sense of self: "Her lack of luggage seems to threaten her sense of identity. If she'd brought a suitcase with her name on it" (Duckworth 1985, 42). She naively expects to derive it from Sidney's acceptance but meets only with a strong rejection on his part. Although the woman seems to realise the destructiveness of this situation, she deludes herself that a break from his domination would leave her helpless: "[...] he is in the driver's seat. If she exasperates him, he could so easily drop her off in the street and drive away. It makes practical good sense to follow his lead obediently" (Duckworth 1985, 31). As de Beauvoir predicts, she thereby falls into a trap of bad faith, which hampers

her self-fulfilment: “It is to find herself, to save herself, that she began by losing herself in him; the fact is that little by little she loses herself” (2011, 782). At a later point, by contrast, after an unsatisfactory sexual act, which, instead of strengthening their bond, gives her a feeling of humiliation, she decides: “Better to destroy than to be destroyed” (Duckworth 1985, 88). The heroine starts to perceive their relationship literally as a struggle for survival and, accordingly, seeks to reverse the power of balance by engaging in the same oppressive practices in order to save herself. In the beginning, it is Sidney who locks Francie in a suntan cubicle; when the novel draws to a close, the heroine does the same to her husband, taking relish in the awareness of his suffering.

The two approaches are clearly juxtaposed against the stance of Adam, a man whom Francie meets by chance at a doctor’s office and who gives her a hope for a better future. Whereas Sidney and Francie tend to fall into the extremes of isolation and hostile competition, Adam strikes a balance between personal freedom and attachment: “Oh I live alone – naturally. But I’m one of a group of people who think the same way I do. It gives us a feeling of being connected” (Duckworth 1985, 134). As Benson claims, “Adam’s vision implies that managing in a changed world requires more than the resolution to become self-sufficient” (226). In stark contrast to Sidney, he recognises and accepts the alterity of his companions: “Adam’s absorbing interests are in people other than himself. And herself – he seemed interested in her feelings and situation” (Duckworth 1985, 144). Thereby he comes closest to grasping the crowning principle of authentic love: “to love genuinely is to love him in his otherness and in that freedom by which he escapes” (de Beauvoir 1948, 28). What distinguishes the man from the other characters is also his understanding that, irrespective of the epidemic, precariousness is inherent in the human condition: “You can be crazy without the vaccine” (Duckworth 1985, 162). Although it is impossible to eradicate the threat that any confrontation with the other involves, he desires to start a new life together with Francie against all the odds. Most importantly, the man tries to convince the heroine that, for their hopes to be realised, a tremendous leap of courage is required. His final challenge – “We could both go mad. But I’ll risk you, if you’ll risk me” (Duckworth 1985, 166) – essentially encapsulates the Beauvoirian concept of reciprocal recognition. Adam regards himself and Francie as equals: as prospective aggressors and victims at the same time. He knows that, in order to achieve happiness, they need to accept their mutual vulnerability and its consequences. The novel thus ends on a rather positive note, stressing that the future will interlace the inevitable risks with opportunities for the couple to overcome the destructive forces and enrich their respective selves: “Two separate beings, [...] confronting each other in their freedom, and seeking the justification of existence through each other, will always live an adventure full of risks and promises” (de Beauvoir 2011, 305).

It is important to note that the understanding of reciprocal recognition as some-

thing that may be achieved only through the personal effort of both lovers distinguishes Adam from Francie. The love that the heroine hankers after throughout the novel essentially corresponds to the ideal of reciprocal recognition: "The perfect relationship. Love and be loved. Give and be understood" (Duckworth 1985, 10). What strikes one in this description is the aspect of bidirectionality, whereby Francie imagines herself not only in the role of the recipient but also in that of giver. Apart from expecting her lover to recognise her subjectivity, she is eager to offer her own contribution, rendering their relationship "a free exchange," which overthrows any "ideas of victory and defeat" (de Beauvoir 2011, 825). At the same time, she clearly revolts against the dehumanised and instrumental model of marriage that gains prevalence in the wake of the epidemic: "Bonding between healthy individuals to produce healthy kids – without love – that's supposed to be OK. I call that sin" (Duckworth 1985, 58). When with Sidney, the heroine also displays good faith, repeatedly trying to establish a closer bond predicated on mutual respect. It is only after her efforts do not meet with a positive response that she changes her approach.

As opposed to Adam, however, she errs in nostalgically identifying the ideal of authentic love with an Edenic state of innocence that has been lost forever with the outbreak of the epidemic and cannot be recovered; consequently, she takes a very bleak view on intimate relationships as excluding any amity, trust and understanding. Francie initially traces back the lost ideal of love to her childhood, only to realise that even her youngest years were tainted by an undercurrent of violence and fear: "If she could only travel back into the past – to the innocence of childhood, to some pre-nuclear period before the horrors took over. Her childhood hasn't of course been pre-nuclear. She was conceived after Hiroshima" (Duckworth 1985, 10). The awareness that interhuman relationships are inherently strained magnifies when she reminisces about her mother, who committed suicide, oblivious to the lot of her six-year-old daughter: "Once she was a loved child [...]. Oh, not for long. And perhaps even in that she was mistaken. For why did her mother swallow down her life with a handful of pills?" (Duckworth 1985, 11). Duckworth thus once again makes it clear that friendship and love always coexist with hostility and conflict, or, to couch it in de Beauvoir's terms, that "the human reality is at once *Mitsein* and separation" (2011, 81), as encapsulated by the following image contrasting interracial war with everyday family love: "On this beach in earlier times the blood of warring Maori and European has been shed. Lovers from happier days have held hands and made children" (Duckworth 1985, 119). The position adopted by Francie is flawed because it paralyses her in nostalgic dreams and prevents her from making a real effort to achieve reciprocal recognition, a revelation that comes to light only with the appearance of Adam in her life.

Conclusion

The paper demonstrates that *Married Alive* bears clear affinities with de Beauvoir's philosophy, focusing, as it does, on the ambiguity of existence and the tense-ridden nature of interhuman relationships. Duckworth uses the motif of an epidemic to expose the precariousness of the human condition as always in-between opposing states: subjectivity and objectivity, life and death, and separateness and interconnectedness. Accordingly, human relationships are represented as, on the one hand, an irremediable threat to one's unwavering sense of self, and, on the other hand, a necessity that, under favourable conditions, may enrich both parties. Aware of the risks that any encounter with the other involves, the characters either isolate themselves, creating an illusion of their own self-sufficiency, or, even worse, experience their relationships as a competition and struggle, striving to gain a robust sense of subjectivity by subjugating and objectifying the lover. As in de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*, these two approaches come under criticism for depriving the characters of humanity and hampering them from authentic self-fulfilment. What is celebrated in *Married Alive* as the key to establishing a mutually rewarding relationship is the wilful acceptance of risk and reciprocal recognition of oneself and the lover as both subject and object. Although Duckworth emphasises that hostility underlies all human relationships, she sees a possibility for lovers to hold it in check by respecting their mutual freedom and vulnerability.

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