Simone de Beauvoir had the same mission as the humanities: to foster critical thinking and compassion. Scholars have often described Beauvoir’s female characters as weak women suffering from depression and guilty of bad faith. Instead, *Les belles images* illustrates that pain and shortcomings are part of a moral crisis or existential awakening that serves as a blueprint for the humanities. The three stages of this process are to become aware of the values that we unconsciously absorb from society; to discover that there are no external authorities, that we must accept the responsibility that comes with freedom; and to learn that we must live with the uncertainty and risk accompanying every decision, the hallmark of an ethics of ambiguity. Following the protagonist’s progression through each of these stages, readers vicariously go through the transformative spiritual adventure offered by the humanities.

1. Introduction

The purpose of the humanities is to foster critical thinking and resistance to harmful societal practices and attitudes. In *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), Martha C. Nussbaum states that universities all over the world have been reducing funds to the humanities and supporting more vocational and pragmatic disciplines. Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul claims that universities are “aligning themselves with various corporatist interests. That is short-sighted and self-destructive” (2005, p. 177). All of Simone de Beauvoir’s literary and philosophical texts offer a running critique of right-wing political dogma and an ongoing Socratic inquiry into meaningful action and the purpose of life. Read in conjunction with her philosophical essays, her novel *Les belles images* (Beautiful images) (1968) serves as a blueprint for the inquiries raised by the humanities and as a timely reminder of their importance to contemporary society.

*Les belles images* tells the story of Laurence, a thirty-one year old woman in the throes of an existential crisis. Married, with two daughters, and working full-time in an advertising agency, Laurence feels alienated from her circle of wealthy bourgeois friends and family, and wonders what could be missing in her life. At first, she feels that everyone has something that is missing in her own life. However, almost halfway through the novel, she says, “unless it is missing in their lives too” (ibid., p. 102). Although Laurence has no confidence in her own judgment, she nonetheless constantly critiques those
around her and exposes them for what they are: cold, uncaring, arrogant, selfish, superficial, conformist snobs. By the end of the novel, she gains just enough strength to stand up to her family and to claim her right to raise her daughters as she sees fit.

Respected Beauvoir scholars have focused on Laurence’s bad faith, denouncing in particular her complicity in her own oppression (Cottrell, 1975; Ascher, 1981; Keefe, 1983; Fallaize, 1988; Shepherd, 2003; Tidd, 2005). Others, for example, have emphasized her revolt and partial emancipation (Evans, 1985; Penrod, 1987; Heath, 1989; Patterson, 1989; Kiran, 2008; Saez, 2008–2009). Beauvoir stated in her memoirs that readers would have liked to have seen Laurence experience a dramatic moment of revelation (prise de conscience). However, as Beauvoir explained her concept of the novel in “Littérature et métaphysique” (Literature and metaphysics) (1946; cf. 2004b), there can be no clear-cut answers in “metaphysical” novels because the reader ponders, doubts, and takes sides; and this hesitant development of his thought enriches him in a way that no teaching of doctrine could (2004b, p. 270).

In this chapter, I argue that Beauvoir deliberately limited Laurence’s emancipation in order to convey the difficult process of awakening that Beauvoir described in her philosophical texts. Beauvoir’s version of existentialism never gels into a fixed philosophical system. Rather, it constantly evolves and questions its own presuppositions. Just as Beauvoir’s literary texts invite participation from the reader, so her philosophical texts take readers on what she calls a “spiritual adventure” so that they will tease out the ideas that will be “points of departure” for their own growth (ibid., 272). However, in all of her texts, Beauvoir insists on one key idea: no changes can be brought to bear on society or within individuals until the underlying problem has been clearly identified. This awakening may classified into three key stages embedded in Beauvoir’s early philosophical writings, in particular, “Existentialism and Popular Wisdom” (2004a), Pyrrhus and Cineas (2004d), and The Ethics of Ambiguity (1997): (1) discovering the values that shape us (ideology); (2) discovering that there is no exterior moral authority (freedom); (3) discovering the risk and uncertainty involved in authentic action (ambiguity). These three stages perfectly exemplify what we do in the humanities and can be seen at work in Les belles images.

2. Stage One: Discovering Ideology

In general, as explained by Terry Eagleton (1991) and other theorists, the humanities starts by exposing the discourse of ideology, or the values and attitudes that we have absorbed, most often unconsciously. This involves a critical examination of culture, which is exactly what Beauvoir does in “Existentialism and Popular Wisdom.” Taking a sharp look at the insidious messages that we receive from family, educators, culture, and media, Beauvoir summarizes the