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## Ennui Chez Sagan

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## Ennui Chez Sagan

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"It is likely that more Americans have seen the name of Françoise Sagan in a gossip column than on a title page. Mlle Sagan's colorful personal life has caught the public fancy, and it is supposed that the characters in her novels are similar to her public image, that is, that they are young and disenchanted, indifferent or hostile to conventionality."

### Cover Page Footnote

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## *Ennui Chez Sagan*

“A strange melancholy pervades me to which I hesitate to give the grave and beautiful name of sorrow.” — *Bonjour Tristesse*

It is likely that more Americans have seen the name of Françoise Sagan in a gossip column than on a title page. Mlle Sagan's colorful personal life has caught the public fancy, and it is supposed that the characters in her novels are similar to her public image, that is, that they are young and disenchanted, indifferent or hostile to conventionality.

The reader who approaches a Sagan novel with such a pre-supposition will, for the most part, be confirmed in it. Not every Sagan character is young; but among her typical protagonists, those who are not cling desperately to their fading youth. A mood of disenchantment, indifferentism and hostility is present and of prime importance. Indeed, this mood, which can be summed up in the French word *ennui*, is the hallmark of Mlle Sagan's novels.

*Ennui* can be translated as boredom or weariness, but these English words do not adequately define this dominant attitude in Sagan characters. Mlle Sagan calls it a “strange melancholy” in the opening lines of *Bonjour Tristesse*, which form the epigram to this article. But neither is *ennui* simply melancholy. After fruitlessly searching for an appropriate English equivalent, I have concluded that the notion of *ennui* can best be explained by discussing its causes.

The basic cause of *ennui* is rejection of responsibility; from this rejection flow all of its characteristics. Just why Mlle Sagan's characters should flee from responsibility is a question that will not be answered here; the fact is that they do. When a person refuses to take on any responsibility, it follows that he will not commit himself to any principle nor involve himself too deeply with any person. To do so would clearly include the responsibility to uphold the principle, to look after the person. This refusal to become *engage* results in giving equal importance, or more precisely, equal unimportance, to all things. The unimportance of all things, in its turn, leads the person to regard the absence of feelings as the most desirable mental state.

This pattern of detachment can be observed in all of Mlle Sagan's protagonists. In *Bonjour Tristesse*, there is a woman named Anne who has more positive attitudes, but she serves mainly to bring the *disengages* into sharper relief. In the later novels no such atypical character is present. Cecile, the young narrator of *Bonjour Tristesse*, is a typical Sagan heroine. When asked to what she attaches importance, she replies: "To nothing at all. You know very well I hardly ever think." She is not content with herself, but regards her discontentment with "only an enjoyable resignation." As for the shortcomings of others, she has discovered it is easy to accept them as long as she does not feel it a duty to correct them. Dominique, the heroine of *A Certain Smile*, reflects on how to achieve the spirit of *ennui*: by destroying that vital part of the mind "which poses the question, what have you done with your life? what do you want to do with it?, a question to which I can only reply, 'nothing'".

The singular pursuit of pleasure by these characters is more than blind self-gratification. Having rejected any permanent standards, any fixed habits, all that is left to them is a regime of inconsistency. This is attained by following every impulse, indulging every whim. "My love of pleasure," says Cecile, "seems to be the only consistent side of my character"—which is to say, inconsistency is her only consistent trait.

The most appealing diversion is, of course, *le jeu d'amour*. Love is regarded principally from two viewpoints: physical pleasure and transitoriness. Physical love is the happiest thing, the purest thing. No one ever thinks of "repressing (desire) or trying to elevate it into a deeper sentiment." No deep attachments are wanted because of the obligations that go with them; all liaisons are, therefore, temporary. They are entered into with the purpose of being "very gay together. Just gay." The characters feel tenderness and devotion come all the more easily because they are transitory.

The *ennui* of Mlle Sagan is certainly a provocative subject. In varying degrees, it has always been present among the young. But today, at least in Mlle Sagan's world, it is the dominant mood. Just why this is so is a question with many half-answers, many of which the reader himself may reflect upon.

Larry McAlpine