



## **Simone De Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*: Fifty years on**

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*“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”.*

Often, on hearing the name Simone de Beauvoir, the first idea that comes into people’s minds is “Jean-Paul Sartre”. Even in these liberated times, Beauvoir, an extraordinarily gifted writer and philosopher in her own right, is often thought of as “Sartre’s companion”. As she pointed out wryly in later life, it never occurred to anyone to describe Sartre as *her* companion. This misinterpretation of her position and significance speaks volumes about the attitude towards women that prevailed at the time she first came on the literary scene and to some extent still prevails today. In the estimation of many modern feminists, the enormous influence Simone de Beauvoir has had through *The Second Sex* will long outlast the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre as a writer and as leader of the existentialist movement, a philosophical movement that exerted huge influence on the European intellectual scene throughout the 1940’s and 50’s but holds little interest for thinkers today. The purpose of this paper is to examine, very briefly, the career of this remarkable woman and the nature of *The Second Sex*, the ground-breaking study of women published in 1949 which is in many ways the founding text for feminists not just in France but all over the world. <sup>1</sup>

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Simone de Beauvoir is one of the great names in French literary history: she was an outstanding philosopher, novelist, short story writer, playwright and essayist, also publishing travel writings, a brilliant and subversive treatise on old age, and several volumes of memoirs which are among the best of her work. With Sartre, she was for over two decades at the centre of existentialism, the philosophical movement that in some ways is seen as the metaphysical expression of the spiritual dishevelment and disillusionment of the post-war period. The couple Beauvoir-Sartre were not only immensely productive writers and thinkers but were also deeply committed political activists: for over thirty years they fought for the rights of workers and the disadvantaged: they defended communism during the Cold War, Algerians during the Algerian struggle of 1954-62, the students during the May 1968 riots; they were always on the side of revolution. It is hard to imagine, in our anti-intellectual Anglophone culture and this era of adoration of film stars and footballers, the immense respect and affection accorded to Beauvoir and Sartre during their lifetime in their role as intellectuals. It was not their personal lives that interested people but their passionate commitment to the goal of changing society, to the ideals of justice and equality, to the raising of people's consciousness. The death of each, Sartre in 1980 and Beauvoir in 1986, produced an outpouring of grief across the nation; millions of people from all walks of life came to mourn in the streets, as if they were sorrowing for the death of a national leader.

Like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir is remarkable for her achievements in a wide range of literary genres. But for millions of women all over the world, Beauvoir is above all else a feminist icon, the author of *The Second Sex*, the revolutionary text of feminism which appeared over two decades before the modern feminist movement came into existence. *The Second Sex* preceded Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* by fourteen years and the French women's movement by 22 years.<sup>2</sup> This massive work – 2 volumes and over 1000 pages long – undertook a task that no writer had thought to tackle before: a thorough scientific and historical analysis of Woman, bringing to bear on the subject all

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the tools of modern psychoanalysis and sociology. Casting aside what she calls the “countless stupidities” (absurd stereotypes)<sup>3</sup> about Woman’s nature which have flowed from the pens of so many male writers over the centuries, Beauvoir sets out to tear down the prejudices and taboos which have imprisoned women in a preordained role. The famous phrase “On ne naît pas femme, on le devient” – “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”<sup>4</sup> which is found at the beginning of Part IV – perfectly encapsulates the twin poles of Beauvoir’s thinking in *The Second Sex*: on the one hand, the existentialist philosophy which underpins all her writings, according to which individuals create society and to assume anything as a given is ‘bad faith’; and on the other hand the belief that femininity in our society is not a natural phenomenon but a social construct.

Simone de Beauvoir was 37 years old when she published *The Second Sex*. She already had behind her an impressive list of publications, including three novels, *L’Invitée* (*The Woman Who Came to Stay*, 1943), *Le Sang des autres* (*The Blood of Others*, 1945), and *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (*All Men Are Mortal*, 1946), one play, *Les Bouches inutiles* (*Useless Mouths*, 1945), and three essays, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (1944), *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* (*The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 1947) and *L’Amérique au jour le jour* (*America Day by Day*, 1948). *The Second Sex* exploded on the literary market like a bomb. 22,000 copies were sold in one week. Beauvoir’s frank discussion of the female body and female sexuality shocked many readers: Albert Camus, furious, remarked that the book was “an insult to the Latin male”, and accusations flew fast and furious that, to use Beauvoir’s paraphrase, she was “frigid, a nymphomaniac, a lesbian, that she had had countless abortions, etc.” The Vatican even put the book on the Index.

What was the content of this book that so scandalised society of the time? What did Beauvoir dare to say that broke all the taboos? Quite simply, *The Second Sex* undertakes, for the first time ever, an examination of the myths created by men about women since the beginning of history. These two quotations that Beauvoir chose as epigraphs to the Introduction explain her purpose: “There is a good principle, which has created order, light, and man; and a bad principle, which

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has created chaos, darkness, and woman” (Pythagoras) and “Everything that has been written about women by men is suspect, for although men are intimately involved, they set themselves up as judges” (the medieval feminist Poulain de La Barre).

Beauvoir’s goal was, in the existentialist terms that she adopted in all her writings, to investigate why “Woman is seen as different from man, not man as different from woman. She represents the inessential in relation to the essential. He is Subject, the Absolute; she is the Other”. The research for the book took Beauvoir two years of study in the Bibliothèque Nationale. In language that is for the most part straightforward, if occasionally heavy for modern tastes, mostly because of the existentialist world view that underlies her perceptions, she covers every aspect of the topic of woman as she sees it. Part I asks the question: How can we explain woman’s status as Other? Beauvoir rejects, one by one, the explanations offered by biology, psychoanalysis and marxism. Part II investigates how the hierarchy of the sexes was established over the course of human history. Part III examines the myths of woman our society has embraced, examining in particular five male authors who illustrate these myths: Montherlant, D.H. Lawrence, the religious poet Paul Claudel, the surrealist poet André Breton, and the novelist Stendhal. Part IV, ‘The Formative Years’, examines the life of the young female child, her young girlhood, her sexual initiation and the phenomenon of the lesbian. Part V looks at the situation of women in society: the married woman, the mother, the prostitute, and the older woman. Part VI, Justifications, analyses three forms of neurosis unconsciously adopted by women to help them to survive in a patriarchal society: narcissism, the role of the woman who sacrifices everything for love, and mysticism. Part VII, the Conclusion, looks hopefully towards the future, towards a period where, thanks to their participation in the labour market, women will be free of dependence on men and the sexes will be able to discover love and harmony within a context of freedom.

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Beauvoir's analysis of woman's situation in society is still extraordinarily relevant today, despite the enormous strides women have made towards equality with men since 1949. Many of her phrases spring out at the reader by their freshness and directness and their uncanny perspicacity. On the question of reproduction, for example, she asserts that "perhaps in time the cooperation of the male will become unnecessary in procreation – the answer, it would seem, to many a woman's prayer" (Part I, ch 1, 41). Analysing historical developments, she states that "Woman was dethroned by the advent of private property, and her lot through the centuries has been bound up with private property" (Part II, ch 3, 113). Her gift for pithy comments and often cruel analysis is illustrated by this quotation: "There is a hoax in marriage, since, while being supposed to socialise eroticism, it succeeds only in killing it" (Part III, 219).

Despite its many qualities, many readers argue that *The Second Sex* is not relevant today. With its strong overlay of existentialist philosophy and accompanying jargon, it is often heavy going. Much of Beauvoir's analysis actually reinforces the notion of a hierarchy in values that she is attempting to debunk; for example, her perception of men's role in society as active, thrusting, aimed at transcendence through activities such as war, hunting, politics and architecture, while women's role is represented as a merely passive one focussed on the bearing and rearing of children, an animal activity and thus inherently less valuable. In general, Beauvoir's vision of women's physical nature is sexist and dated, for she portrays it as a handicap: women are always at the mercy of their biology, suffering the torments of menstruation, repeated pregnancies, childbirth, breastfeeding and finally menopause. The book shows no appreciation at all of the positive side of female sexuality. Moreover, Beauvoir seems to have no understanding of motherhood,<sup>5</sup> dismissing it from the arrogance of her childless state as an activity that almost always leads to unhappiness for both the child, powerless to protect itself against a domineering mother, and for the mother, who inevitably watches the child that was to compensate her for the frustrations of her marriage growing up and slipping out

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of her grasp. And there are striking gaps in the discussion of women's and men's roles: for example, how is it that, despite a brilliant analysis of the meaning of housework, Beauvoir never once suggests that men and women should share the burden of housework? Many critics have also asked the question how it is possible that a woman theoretically so aware of feminist principles totally failed during her life to analyse her relationship to Sartre from a feminist viewpoint.

However, in the context of the time, Beauvoir's achievement in producing the feminist analysis that she produced was quite extraordinary. An overview of her life will amply prove this point. Beauvoir was a woman from the upper middle class who herself experienced few of the burdens experienced by ordinary women. To use phrases much used today, she was single, childfree, economically self-sufficient and free of all domestic responsibilities; as an intellectual she concentrated all her life on issues totally divorced from the concerns of ordinary women. Ironically, this woman who revolutionised the lives of so many women by the publication of *The Second Sex* did not identify herself as a feminist until late in life. It was not until 1971, after almost two decades of political activism, that she joined the feminist movement in France and began to participate in campaigns for equal pay for equal work, the right to contraception and abortion, refuges for battered women and protection against rape and sexual abuse. She claims in her memoirs that as a child she never felt that she was inferior by virtue of being born a girl. All through her childhood and young womanhood she felt confident of her intellectual abilities, and as a young woman, joining the intellectual circle of which Sartre was the centre, she seems to have held her own and to have felt that she was treated as an equal.

It took years for her to come to the realisation that the position of a woman in society is not the same as that of a man. This blindness to women's situation in general was partly due to her situation in her own family: she was born as the elder of two girls, so that, according to the existentialist analysis which she presents in her memoirs, there was always someone weaker than she was – her younger sister H el ene - who looked up to her and played the role of Object to

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Beauvoir's role as Subject. Secondly, unlike most girls of her time and class, Beauvoir was not married off by her parents to a suitable boy before she turned twenty but instead was allowed to follow her natural bent and plan for a career as a writer<sup>6</sup>. When Beauvoir was an adolescent, her family, who belonged to the *haute bourgeoisie* of Montparnasse, suffered a fall into relative poverty and it was because her parents could not provide dowries for their daughters that they were forced, reluctantly, to allow H elene to become an artist and Simone to become a teacher of philosophy.

Beauvoir was born and spent all her life on the Left Bank of the Seine, in Montparnasse. This area of Paris was, and remains, a meeting place for intellectuals and artists, an area that, despite all her travels to places as far-flung and exotic as the United States, Cuba, China and Russia, always remained for her the centre of the intellectual world. She was born in an apartment building over the Caf e Rotonde in 1908, moving later with her parents and her sister, after the change in the family's fortunes, to another cheaper, more cramped apartment in the same district. Her childhood, she said, was a happy one; she had an immense curiosity and a zest for life, and she felt loved and secure in her family. Tensions only developed after the family became impoverished and Beauvoir's growing desire for independence came into conflict with her mother's rigid conventionality and Catholic beliefs.

Once she had rejected religion at the age of fourteen, Beauvoir developed a passionate interest in philosophy, especially in the writings of Leibniz, Kant and Heidegger. In 1926, after graduating brilliantly from her *lyc ee* in literature, Latin and mathematics, she entered the Sorbonne to study philosophy for the *agr egation*, the highly competitive examination that opens up teaching posts in high schools in France and guarantees to successful candidates lifelong respect in French society. The Ecole normale sup erieure, the elite college that prepares students for the *agr egation*, was in those days closed to women, but Beauvoir made friends with students attending the school and joined a study group in philosophy which opened up a new world of ideas to her, that of existentialism.

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Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Nizan (all to become important philosophers later on) were her companions, all of them two to three years older than she was. In 1929, when she passed the *agrégation*, she was 21. She was the youngest of all the candidates in France and she was placed second, behind Sartre. In actual fact – this information emerged much later – Beauvoir actually gained half a mark more than Sartre, but her mark was lowered because the examiners could not tolerate the idea of a woman outstripping a man<sup>7</sup>. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, reflecting on Beauvoir's career a few years after her death, commented that the French education system had always stood between Sartre and Beauvoir. All her life Beauvoir felt intellectually dominated by Sartre. It was partly because Sartre discouraged her, said Bourdieu, that Beauvoir renounced the career she had planned as a philosopher and turned instead to literature – literature being considered the proper domain of women – while Sartre devoted himself to philosophy, which was considered a 'man's' subject.<sup>8</sup> In this context it should be borne in mind, of course, that apart from her novels and short stories Beauvoir did indeed publish non-literary works, some of which are overtly philosophical.

Who was the greater philosopher, Sartre or Beauvoir? Was Sartre really Beauvoir's intellectual superior? Some critics assert that he could not have achieved what he did without Beauvoir; that, because of her major role as editor of his work (far more important than his role in commenting on her work), she ought to be acknowledged as the major author of several of the works, which have been attributed to Sartre alone. This may well be true. It is more important, however, for our purposes, to see what was Simone de Beauvoir's perception of the facts. When she met Sartre, she said, he impressed her more than anyone she had ever met: "It was the first time in my life that I had felt intellectually inferior to anyone". She later said that Sartre listened to her as no one else did and judged her not as they did, according to their own standards, but by her own.<sup>9</sup> Their liaison was a stormy one, which did not remain sexual for long but developed into one of the most famous intellectual partnerships of all time and



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was broken only by death. At the age of 23, Beauvoir concluded with Sartre what they called a pact. They would not lie to each other or conceal anything; they would maintain emotional fidelity to the 'essential' love but would allow each other 'contingent' loves. The partnership also included intense intellectual support: Sartre and Beauvoir became extremely close colleagues in the existentialist movement and in their work as writers and political activists, each of them relying heavily on the other's ideas and feedback. The two remained intellectually committed and emotionally loyal to each other all their lives, but had hundreds of other lovers as the years went on (Sartre more than Beauvoir). Some of the time these affairs caused great pain to the partner, more often to Beauvoir than to Sartre, as in the case of the triangle Beauvoir describes in her novel *L'Invitée (She Came to Stay)*, where the young woman guest of the title starts an affair with the lover of the woman friend who invites her to stay.

In the context of the Beauvoir-Sartre partnership it is, however, essential to mention Nelson Algren. The love between Beauvoir and Algren<sup>10</sup> and the decision made by Beauvoir to sacrifice Algren to her commitment to Sartre is a moving story, almost Racinian in the terrible choices which she faced. Nelson Algren was a brilliant American writer of the realist school whom Beauvoir met in Chicago in 1947 when she was on a lecture tour of the U.S.A. Against all her expectations (since, with a certain prudery typical of her sex and class, she believed that at the advanced age of 39 her romantic life was virtually over), she fell deeply and passionately in love with Algren, and he with her. For over four years they kept up the relationship, with frequent visits and a series of very touching letters, but in the end Beauvoir felt that she had to break with Algren, on the one hand because she feared that she would not be able to continue her writing career if she moved to the United States to live with him, and on the other hand, because of her enduring commitment to work and struggle side by side with Sartre for the causes she believed in; or, more simply, because, as she wrote in a letter to Algren, "Sartre needs me" (July 19, 1948). The split was heart breaking for both of them. Algren never forgave her and was deeply

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distressed by Beauvoir's novel *The Mandarins*, winner of the Goncourt Prize for literature in 1954, which gives a fictionalised account of the affair.

Young people of our own era who thumb their noses at traditional-minded parents by living together without being married have no idea of how much they owe to Sartre and Beauvoir. To adopt the kind of relationship they adopted, in the 1930's, was revolutionary. They shared their lives, as Beauvoir explained in a 1972 interview with Alice Schwarzer, but only up to a point, avoiding all the monotony and conflicts that can destroy the pleasure of daily life. They did not live in a house, but in two separate bedrooms in a series of different hotels; they did not cook, but ate out in restaurants. When they went on holiday, they went together but maintained their freedom to go to different places and see different friends. Thus they had the impression (according to Beauvoir) of gaining only the best that there was to be gained from the relationship.<sup>11</sup>

But as Sartre and Beauvoir admitted to Alice Schwarzer, this way of living could be hard on others: "C'est les tiers qui ont fait les frais de notre relation" ("Other people have paid the price for our relationship"), the others being the 'contingent' loves. The publication of Sartre's letters and diaries after his death, and since Beauvoir's death in 1986 of her own, have revealed new aspects of their personalities that they kept carefully hidden during their lifetimes.<sup>12</sup> Sartre and Beauvoir have been accused of sexual and emotional exploitation, as the third parties involved with them were often much younger admirers, part of the circle of former students and disciples who surrounded them and who were easily seduced by their fame and reputation. It has even been suggested that Beauvoir operated as a kind of pimp for Sartre, seducing young women herself (for she was bisexual, although she never admitted it) and then passing them on to him.

Despite these weaknesses, Simone de Beauvoir has been and remains a figure admired, even revered, by millions of women all over the world. Perhaps she deferred to Sartre too much, perhaps she did not sufficiently respect her own

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intelligence in relation to his, perhaps she exploited other women in the drive to maintain the pact she concluded with Sartre. Perhaps she was in “bad faith”, hiding her lesbianism from the world. But her life shows an intellectual woman who remained committed to her work and was always open to new ideas and new people. In the words of Kate Millett, author of *Sexual Politics*, hers was an exemplary life.<sup>13</sup> Within her limits, she was true to her ideals, and she achieved what she dreamed of achieving: she changed the world with her books. On her death, Elisabeth Badinter declared: “Women, you owe her everything!”<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

1. Among the enormous body of films and critical writings on the life and work of Simone de Beauvoir, the following studies are particularly recommended: Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1990); *Simone de Beauvoir. Un film de Josée Dayan and Malka Ribowska* (Paris, Gallimard, 1979); Elizabeth Fallaize, *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Routledge, 1988); Marie-José Fourtanié, *Les Belles Images: Simone de Beauvoir* (Paris: Bertrand-Lacoste, 1994); Simone de Beauvoir, directed by Karl-Heinz Gotze and Ralph Quinke, 1997; Terry Keefe, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Macmillan, 1998); Toril Moi, *Feminist Theory and Simone de Beauvoir* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990) and *The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Judith Okely, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Re-Reading* (London: Virago, 1986); Karen Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996); and Anne Whitmarsh, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Limits of Commitment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

2. These testimonials give a flavour of the deeply emotional reaction of thousands of readers of *The Second Sex* who wrote to Beauvoir to thank her for her work: Cécile Dupont, an ordinary woman from Rouen, wrote, “Simone, you helped me to find myself”; Susan Nyack, from New Jersey, wrote, “You

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changed my whole life”; Kate Millett, the important American feminist writer of the 1970’s and 80’s and author of *Sexual Politics* (1970), spoke of Beauvoir as her great inspiration; Elisabeth Badinter, the prominent French feminist historian, said, “Elle est ma mère spirituelle” (She is my spiritual mother) (*Daughters of de Beauvoir*, film produced by Penny Foster, 1988).

3. Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, v. 1 (Paris: Folio, 1989), 11.

4. LDS, Part IV, Ch 1, 295

5. On Beauvoir’s attitude to this question, see Yolanda Patterson, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Demystification of Motherhood* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1989).

6. Reflecting on her life at the beginning of the final volume of her memoirs *Tout compte fait (All Said and Done)*, Beauvoir writes that from childhood onwards, her overriding project was that of knowing and putting things into words (*All Said and Done*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, 25). The idea that an individual has an original project, or makes an original or fundamental ‘choice’, is a crucial one in existentialist thinking. See for example Sartre’s *L’Etre et le Néant (Being and Nothingness)*, Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 534-61.

7. See the interview with Pierre Bourdieu in the film *Simone de Beauvoir* directed by Karl-Heinz Gotze and Ralph Quinke, 1997.

8. This perspective on Beauvoir’s choice of literature over philosophy – that Beauvoir was thereby internalising patriarchal social structures - is also adopted, for instance, by Toril Moi in *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994).

9. See the film *Simone de Beauvoir*, directed by Karl-Heinz Gotze and Ralph Quinke, 1997.

10. For an account of this affair, see Jean-Pierre Saccani, *Nelson et Simone* (Monaco: du Rocher, 1994).

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11. *Simone de Beauvoir*, directed by Karl-Heinz Gotze and Ralph Quinke, 1997.
12. Among these are Beauvoir's *Lettres à Sartre* (Gallimard, 1990) (*Letters to Sartre*, transl. and ed. Quintin Hoare, New York, Arcade, 1990) and *Lettres à Nelson Algren: Un amour transatlantique* (Gallimard, 1997) (*Letters to Nelson Algren: A Transatlantic Love*).
13. *Daughters of de Beauvoir*, film produced by Penny Foster, 1988. (For further details, see <http://www.filmakers.com/indivs/DaughtersBeauvoir.htm>. [25th October, 2002]).
14. Terry Keefe, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 9.

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