

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

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Introduction

Among the most prominent French intellectuals of the twentieth century, Simone de Beauvoir is recognized as a pioneering feminist thinker and leading proponent of existentialist philosophy. Her groundbreaking sociological treatise *La deuxième sexe* (1949; *The Second Sex*), in which she delineates the historical and cultural structures of patriarchy, is often credited with establishing the theoretical underpinnings of modern feminist scholarship. Along with philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, her lifetime companion, and Albert Camus, Beauvoir helped define and popularize the principles of existentialism in her novels and nonfiction works such as *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* (1947; *The Ethics of Ambiguity*) and later writings



on aging and death. Her best known novels, including the award-winning *Les mandarins* (1954; *The Mandarins*), are noted for their lively portrayal of Parisian social and intellectual milieus of the 1930s and 1940s. Eschewing marriage and motherhood, Beauvoir served as a living model of female liberation and artistic commitment. Her observations concerning the social construction of female inferiority and the primacy of self-determination are central to her series of autobiographic volumes, including *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958; *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*), regarded as an important personal testament to the plight of women in a male-dominated world.

Biographical Information

Born Simone Lucie Ernestine Marie Bertrand de Beauvoir in Paris, France, Beauvoir was raised by her watchful Catholic mother and agnostic father, a lawyer, in an upper-middle-class home. The pleasant security of Beauvoir's childhood ended, however, with the outbreak of the First World War, during which the family fortune dissipated. A precocious student and zealous reader of forbidden books, Beauvoir received a strict, limited education at a Catholic school for girls. As an adolescent she struggled against the strictures of religion and social expectations that discouraged intellectual pursuits among women. The 1929 death of her best friend Elizabeth (Zaza) Mabile, whose manipulative parents refused to allow her to marry a fellow student, later marked a turning point in Beauvoir's hostility toward bourgeois institutions. Defying her parents' wishes, Beauvoir announced her ambition to teach and enrolled at the Institut Saint-Marie in 1925, where she studied philosophy and literature. Continuing her education at the Sorbonne, she received the *agrégation de philosophie* in 1929. While at the Sorbonne, Beauvoir met Jean-Paul Sartre, an intellectual equal and intimate whose existentialist philosophy influenced much of her own thought and writing. Dismissing conventional morality in favor of principles of honesty and freedom, Beauvoir and Sartre never

married, although they maintained a lifelong open relationship that permitted “contingent” loves. After receiving her degree, graduating second only to Sartre, Beauvoir taught at several French lycées from 1931 to 1943 while writing fiction and associating with Left Bank intellectual circles habituated by Camus, André Malraux, Raymond Queneau, and Michel Leiris. Beauvoir’s previously unpublished short stories from this period are contained in *Quand prime le spirituel* (1979; *When Things of the Spirit Come First*). Though notably apolitical during the 1930s, she and Sartre became involved in the French Resistance while living under Nazi Occupation in Paris during the Second World War. Beauvoir also published her first book, the novel *L’invitée* (1943; *She Came to Stay*), and the philosophical tract *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (1944), during the war. In 1945 Beauvoir and Sartre founded *Les Temps modernes*, a literary and political journal devoted to existentialism. Beauvoir also produced her only play, *Les bouches inutiles* (1945; *Who Shall Die?*), and two additional novels, *Le sang des autres* (1945; *The Blood of Others*) and *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (1946; *All Men Are Mortal*). After a visit to the United States in 1947, Beauvoir published *L’Amérique au jour le jour* (1948; *America Day by Day*), a volume of anti-capitalist observations dedicated to Richard Wright and his wife. Her first full-length philosophical work appeared as *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in 1947, followed by *The Second Sex* in 1949. Among the leading figures of the French left-wing intelligentsia, Beauvoir was politically active during the 1950s as a supporter of Marxist causes in the Soviet Union and China-- communist China is the subject of *La longue marche* (1957; *The Long March*-- and as an outspoken critic of French military involvement in Algeria and Indo-China. She also produced *The Mandarins*, winner of the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1954, and the first of her autobiographic works, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, continued over the next two decades with *La force de l’âge* (1960; *The Prime of Life*), *La force des choses* (1963; *Force of Circumstance*), and *Tout compte fait* (1974; *All Said and Done*). Her reminiscences in *Une morte très douce* (1964; *A Very Easy Death*) relate her anguish over her mother’s illness and death in 1963. Beauvoir published additional fiction in the 1960s with *Les belles images* (1966) and *La femme rompue* (1968; *The Woman Destroyed*). Though reluctant to assume a feminist label, during the 1970s Beauvoir became an important advocate of women’s issues and reproductive rights as a member of the Mouvement de la Libération des femmes (MLF) and as president of the feminist groups Choisir and Ligue du droit des femmes. *La vieillesse* (1970; *The Coming of Age*), regarded as a companion volume to *The Second Sex*, deals with the appalling treatment of the elderly. In her last published work, *La cérémonie des adieux* (1981; *Adieux*), Beauvoir records her final conversations with Sartre and reflects upon her painful witness to his decline. Beauvoir died of pneumonia in Paris six years later at age seventy-eight.

Major Works

Beauvoir’s existentialist investigations, autobiographic writings, and fiction center largely upon her preoccupation with the nature of personal freedom, moral action, and, in particular, the alienation of women in a society defined by men and male attributes. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, her first major philosophical work, Beauvoir addresses the absurdity of the human condition and the possibility of self-definition and transcendence. Influenced by the existentialist theories of Sartre, Beauvoir describes human life as an inherently ambiguous process of becoming that depends upon relationships with others for meaning. Turning her attention to the particular situation of women in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir asserts that female sexual identity is predominately a social construct built upon oppressive male definitions of femininity. As Beauvoir famously observed, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Drawing broadly upon existentialist philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, and historical research in this expansive two-volume study, Beauvoir exposes the modalities of female subordination embedded in myth, cultural practices, biological facts, and gender stereotypes that cast women as weak, alienated objects of masculine ideals and desires. According to Beauvoir, women

are relegated to a secondary existence of dependency and passivity because they are defined in relation to men rather than as autonomous subjects themselves. Beauvoir's four volume autobiographic series chronicles her personal and intellectual development over six decades. *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* recounts her happy childhood and disillusioning formative years, including her close relationship with her sister, intense friendship with Zaza, and introduction to Sartre. *The Prime of Life* documents her unconventional relationship with Sartre beginning in 1929 and their experiences during the Nazi Occupation of France. *The Force of Circumstance* covers events in her life from the Liberation of Paris to 1963, including somber reflection upon the French-Algerian War and the subjects of aging and death. In *All Said and Done* Beauvoir abandons the chronological presentation of the previous three volumes to contemplate alternate paths that her life may have taken and to discuss her dreams and international travels, leaving the reader with an open-ended summary of her life. Much of Beauvoir's fiction explores the existentialist tenets of freedom and contingency with heavy autobiographic overtones. Her first novel, *She Came to Stay*, examines destructive emotional dynamics in a love triangle consisting of a man and two women. Set in Paris at the outbreak of the Second World War, the story involves Pierre and Françoise, a committed though unmarried couple, and Xavière, a younger woman whom they invite to stay with them. Tension mounts as Pierre and Xavière grow closer, alienating Françoise until, consumed with hatred and jealousy, she finally murders Xavière. In *The Blood of Others*, one of the first novels ever written about the French Resistance, Beauvoir explores the individual's moral obligation to society through the guilt-wracked recollections of Jean Blomert, a member of the Resistance who abandons his bourgeois family for the Communist party, and his lover, Hélène Bertrand, a Resistance fighter who is killed in action against the Nazis. As Jean struggles to reconcile the deaths of several familiar people and friends, including Hélène, whom he feels responsible for, he realizes that a life untainted by social guilt is impossible, affirming the belief that the only moral response to injustice is personal engagement on the side of freedom. In *All Men Are Mortal* Beauvoir traces the peregrinations of Raymond Fosca, an immortal thirteenth century Italian prince who attempts to direct the course of European history through his interventions over several centuries. Juxtaposing Fosca's solitude and ennui with the political commitment and urgency of mortal actors, Beauvoir suggests that a meaningful human existence depends upon the prospect of death and its attendant joys and anguish, without which freedom and action have no value. Beauvoir's most acclaimed novel, *The Mandarins*, involves a coterie of disillusioned French intellectuals immediately after the Second World War. Once united in purpose and action in the Resistance movement, the small circle of friends soon find their grand hopes for the future shattered by divisive allegiances to the vying postwar ideologies of communism and capitalism. Though Beauvoir denied that the novel was a roman à clef, the four main characters-- Anne Dubreuil, Henri Perron, Robert Dubreuil, and Lewis Brogan-- bear strong resemblance to herself, Sartre, Camus, and American author Nelson Algren, with whom Beauvoir was romantically involved at the time. As in earlier works, in *The Mandarins* Beauvoir examines the competing interests of individualism and political commitment and the intellectual's responsibility to act. Beauvoir's last two volumes of fiction, *Les Belles Images* and *The Woman Destroyed*, feature modern professional women who struggle to find meaning and acceptance amid the decadent materialism and shifting political fortunes of the 1960s. *Les Belles Images*, translated as "advertisements," centers upon Laurence, a wife, mother, and advertising producer who maintains a façade of success and satisfaction to mask her own deep-seated metaphysical fears. She is eventually forced to confront reality and her feelings when her ten-year-old daughter expresses serious concerns about social injustice and human suffering. *The Woman Destroyed* consists of three novellas. The first, *Age of Discretion*, is narrated by an aging mother, wife, and left-wing intellectual who encounters changing contemporary values when her writing is dismissed by critics and her son abandons his political principles for a lucrative position with the government. In the second story, *Monologue*, the female narrator is a forty-three-year-old woman who angrily decries her martial

misfortunes and the suicide of her daughter while alone in her apartment on New Year's Eve. The final story, *The Woman Destroyed*, is narrated by Monique, a middle-aged woman who discovers that her husband, a successful doctor, is having an affair with a younger, professional woman. Monique rues her decision to forgo her own medical studies to marry and have children, underscoring the consequences of female dependency and self-sacrifice in contrast to the independence of her husband's lover.

Critical Reception

Beauvoir is highly regarded for her important contributions to the development of postwar existential philosophy and her systematic examination of women's issues and patriarchal institutions. Best known for *The Second Sex*, widely considered a classic of feminist literature, Beauvoir is praised as one of the earliest and most perceptive twentieth century feminist theorists. Since its original publication in 1949, *The Second Sex* has generated heated controversy and remains the focus of critical writing on Beauvoir to this day. Though once a revered staple of feminist reading, *The Second Sex* has fallen out of favor among many postmodern feminist writers over the last several decades, largely due to what critics consider Beauvoir's disdain for the female body and biological reductionism. As Sonia Kruks notes, "Beauvoir has been criticized, with considerable justification, for her horror of the female body and its functions. There are indeed many passages in *The Second Sex* where women's bodily functions are identified with animality, passivity, and lack of freedom and are denigrated from the masculinist standpoint of an apparently disembodied reason and freedom." Critics also note that Beauvoir's reliance on phallogentric concepts derived from Freudian psychology and Sartre's existentialism limit her ability to conceive of new forms of freedom outside of patriarchal language and ideologies. Despite such objections, Beauvoir is considered a formidable philosophical thinker and critics continue to laud the importance of her original insights into the socialization of gender and the alienation of women. Margaret A. Simons concludes, "Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, laid the theoretical foundations for a radical feminist movement of the future and defined a feminist political philosophy of lasting importance." While *The Mandarins* remains Beauvoir's most acclaimed work of fiction, she has received considerable praise and popularity for *She Came to Stay*, *The Blood of Others*, *Les Belles Images*, and *The Woman Destroyed*. These works, and her four autobiographic volumes, continue to be regarded as important sources for the understanding of Beauvoir's existentialist theories, the historical context of her feminist perspective, and mid-century French intellectual activity.