



Simone de Beauvoir

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Biography



- Simone de Beauvoir was born in 1908.
- At the time of her death she was honored as a crucial figure in the struggle for women's rights, and as an eminent writer, having won the Prix Goncourt, the prestigious French literary award, for her novel *The Mandarins*. She was also famous for being the life long companion of Jean Paul Sartre.
- She is best known for her 1949 work *The Second Sex*. From the time it was published, it was considered to be a "foundation piece for feminist theory" and has continued to influence feminism since that time. The work was also attacked by many who considered its frank discussion of sexuality inappropriate, especially for a female author.

Biography



- Beauvoir did not consider herself a philosopher, but an author. In fact, she described herself as a "midwife" of Jean Paul Sartre's existential thought rather than as a thinker herself. As time has passed, however, her influence has grown.
- Beauvoir's influence on the French political and cultural world faded in the 1960s as she embraced communism and became an outspoken critic of colonialism.
- She died in 1986.

“Since 1986, Beauvoir’s letters and journals have been published, shining new light on the most interesting intellectual relationship of the 20th century. Included in this material is new evidence of the influence she exercised on Sartre’s work, and influence she denied during her lifetime. It has become clear that the woman who changed the course of feminism also plays a pivotal role in the development of existentialist morality. During her lifetime and for many years after, Beauvoir was described merely as a companion to Sartre. Only recently is her unique contribution gaining the recognition it deserves.”

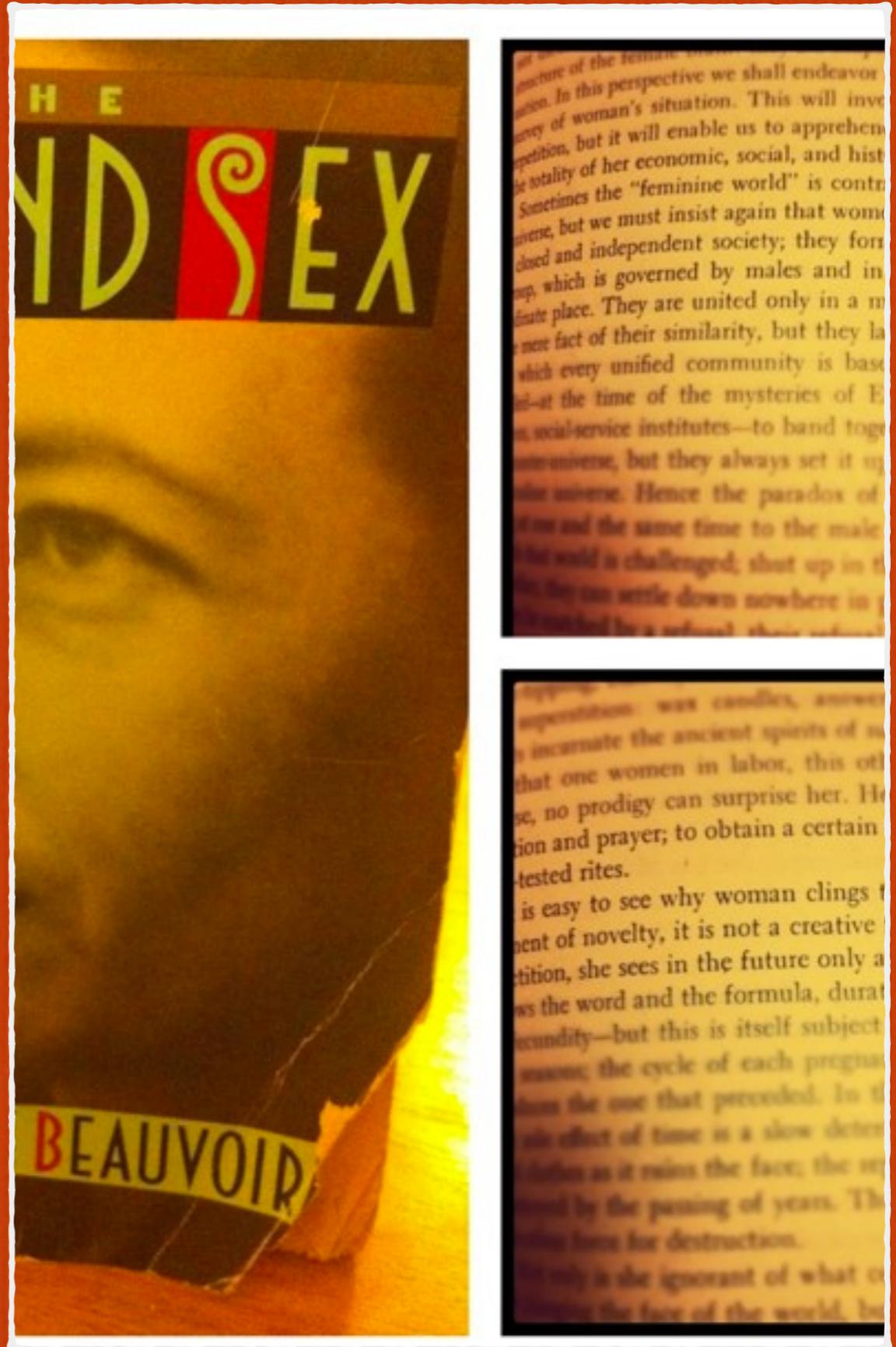
–Sally Scholz, On de Beauvoir (2000)

Her Philosophy

“I tore myself away from the safe comfort of certainties through my love for truth — and truth rewarded me.”

The Other

“One is not born a woman; one becomes one.”



The Other

- She wrote: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one." In effect, sex is not gender. The former is a biological fact, the latter a social construction. While she argues it would be absurd to ignore differences in sex, constructs of gender are most often used to oppress women.
- Beauvoir argued that men had made women the "Other" in society by putting a false aura of "mystery" around them. She argued that men used this as an excuse not to understand women or their problems and not to help them, and that this stereotyping was always done in societies by the group higher in the hierarchy to the group lower in the hierarchy.
- She wrote that this also happened on the basis of other categories of identity, such as race, class, and religion. But she said that it was nowhere more true than with sex in which men stereotyped women and used it as an excuse to organize society into a patriarchy.

The Other (continued)

- She references Hegel's philosophy and argues that men identify themselves as the Master and identify women by this standard of the human, seeing them as weak and inferior.
- Paradoxically, women are regarded as inferior for following the male definition of what it means to be female and punished for deviating from it.
- Beauvoir argued that women have historically been considered deviant, abnormal. She said that even Mary Wollstonecraft considered men to be the ideal toward which women should aspire. Beauvoir said that this attitude limited women's success by maintaining the perception that they were a deviation from the normal, and were always outsiders attempting to emulate "normality."

Criticism of Feminine Nature

“Change your life today. Don't gamble on the future—act now, without delay.”

SO LONG AS WOMEN
ARE NOT FREE THE
PEOPLE ARE
NOT FREE



Criticism of Feminine Nature

- She argues against the idea of a "feminine nature"--the centuries old concept of a timeless feminine essence that stands as the model of passivity and unapproachable purity in contrast with the implied masculine essence as one of activity and subjectivity.
- She argues that just as there is no essence of a person, there is no essence of what it means to be a woman.
- She contends that this eternal feminine nature places a burden on women because of its contradictory features.
- It presents woman as the mother and nurturer to whom we owe our lives and who deserves our loving gratitude but also as the source of our mortality (Eve in the Biblical Garden of Eden) and thus deserving of our hatred and blame.

“It was said that I refused to grant any value to the maternal instinct and to love. This was not so. I simply asked that women should experience them truthfully and freely, whereas they often use them as excuses and take refuge in them, only to find themselves imprisoned in that refuge when those emotions have dried up in their hearts. I was accused of preaching sexual promiscuity; but at no point did I ever advise anyone to sleep with just anyone at just any time; my opinion on this subject is that all choices, agreements and refusals should be made independently of institutions, conventions and motives of self-aggrandizement; if the reasons for it are not of the same order as the act itself, then the only result can be lies, distortions and mutilations.”

-Simone de Beauvoir, Force of Circumstances (1968)

Liberation

“I wish that every human life might be pure transparent freedom.”



Liberation!

- **As a result, she argues that we need to tear down the patriarchal structures that are the vehicles of oppression which define women. Ideally, in de Beauvoir's vision of the future, men and women will live in a society that is free of oppression, a society in which individual men and women are free to create themselves.**
- **Beauvoir asserted that women are as capable of choice as men, and thus can choose to elevate themselves, moving beyond the 'immanence' to which they were previously resigned and reaching 'transcendence', a position in which one takes responsibility for oneself and the world, where one chooses one's freedom.**

“All oppression creates a state of war. And this is no exception.”

–Simone de Beauvoir