

# The Second Sex

# Simone de Beauvoir

At 40, Simone de Beauvoir was the author of several well-received novels, but was better known as Jean Paul-Sartre's long-time companion. All that changed with the release of *Le Deuxième sexe*. The book was a bestseller from the start, and de Beauvoir found herself the most controversial woman in France.

Given her relatively privileged position – teaching career, university degree, movement in Parisian intellectual circles – de Beauvoir herself had never felt much of a sense of injustice or inequality. Nevertheless, she began to realize that people saw her as Sartre's inferior merely because she was female. When she sat down to write *The Second Sex*, she was surprised to find herself putting down the most essential fact of her existence: "I am a woman."

*The Second Sex* is not simply about the role of women in history or society, but about "Woman" as an archetype and philosophical category that is interchangeable with the idea of "Other." This philosophical base raises the book above other feminist writing and makes it fascinating reading.

The work spans 700 pages and is not easy to summarize. Book One traces the history of women's place in society from the bronze age to medieval times to modernity, including an analysis of the "myth of woman" through five authors: Henry de Montherlant, D.H. Lawrence, Paul Claudel, André Breton, and Stendhal. Book Two traces the situation of woman today, from childhood to sexual awakening, marriage to menopause, including portraits of woman as lover, narcissist, and mystic, before ending on a more upbeat note with a chapter on women's independence.

## Woman as Other

*The Second Sex* is an attempt to answer the basic question "What is Woman?" – that is, as an archetype or category as opposed to women as individuals. Throughout history, men have differentiated and defined women in reference to themselves, rather than as beings in their own right. A person is a man, and no more explanation is necessary, while a woman must be described as a person of the female sex. The result, de Beauvoir says, is that woman is "the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is Absolute – she is the Other."

*"One is not born a woman: one becomes a woman."*

*"The individual life history of woman – because she is still bound up in her female functions – depends in much greater degree than that of man upon her physiological destiny; and the curve of her destiny is much more uneven, more discontinuous, than the masculine curve."*

## In a nutshell

The concept of "Other" helps us understand the position and power of women through history.

## In a similar vein

Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness* (p 266)

not considered the "main" group. In Western civilization, for instance, white men are the "essential," the "Absolute," while any other kind of person, including women, Blacks, and Jews, have been - whether consciously or unconsciously - put in the Other basket. When a group in society is made inferior in this way, they *become* inferior through lost opportunities and debasement.

Men do not feel that they have to justify themselves on any objective basis, but get their feeling of superiority from not being women. This results in the clichéd, although true, view that a woman has to do twice as much to be seen as the equal of a man. Discrimination against women, de Beauvoir writes, is "a miraculous balm for those afflicted with an inferiority complex, and indeed no one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility." Today we are familiar with such a truth, but imagine the affront that it caused in bourgeois France 60 years ago.

De Beauvoir expresses her amazement that although women make up half of the human race, they can still be discriminated against. She observes that in democracies men like to say that they see women as equal (or democracy would be a lie), but their attitudes on many levels tell a different story.

### Is biology destiny?

De Beauvoir goes back to the earliest conceptions of biology to show how science itself served to reduce the power and potency of the female in favor of the male. In conception, for instance, the passivity of the female was contrasted with the "active principle" of male sperm, which was thought to determine all the characteristics of the newborn. Yet in conception, de Beauvoir notes, neither male or female gamete is superior to the other; rather, they both lose their individuality when the egg is fertilized.

The burden of the continuity of life is still a female one, and given the energy and time required for this the female's possibilities are severely restricted, because "the woman is adapted to the needs of the egg rather than to her own requirements." From puberty to menopause, she is at the mercy of a body changing itself according to reproductive needs, and must put up with a monthly reminder of this. In pregnancy in the early stages, vomiting and loss of appetite "signalize the revolt of the organism against the invading species." Many a woman's maladies do not stem from external threats, but from dealing with her own, often problematic reproductive system. Moreover, the more intense emotionality of women is related to irregularities in secretions in the endocrine system, which have an effect on the nervous system. Many of these traits, de Beauvoir points out, "originate in woman's subordination to the species." In contrast, "the male seems infinitely favoured: his sexual life is

not in opposition to his existence as a person, and biologically it runs an even course, without crises and generally without mishap." Though women tend to live longer than men, they are ill more often, and overall are less in control of their bodies - their bodies control them. However, menopause can bring liberation, as a woman is no longer determined or judged according to the childbearing function.

While a woman's biological features are therefore the key to understanding her situation in life, de Beauvoir optimistically says, "I deny that they establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny." Biology is not reason enough for male/female inequality, nor grounds for woman being cast as "Other," and a female's physicality does not condemn her to remain subordinate. Moreover, while animals can be studied as static organisms, it is much harder to make assessments of *people* as male or female human beings, since our sex does not define us in the way it does other animals. In many physical respects a woman is less rugged than a man, so ostensibly her projects and prospects are more limited, but, drawing on Heidegger, Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir notes that "the body is not a thing, it is a situation." When viewed in this way, women's prospects may be different to men's, but no more limited. What is more, many of women's "weaknesses" are such only in the context of male ends. Physical inferiority, for instance, becomes meaningless if there is an absence of violence and wars. If society is different, so the evaluation of physical attributes changes.

### Becoming woman

Book Two contains de Beauvoir's famous comment that "one is not born but rather becomes a woman." In childhood there is no difference between the sexes in terms of what they are capable of. Differentiation begins when boys are told of their superiority and how they need to prepare for the difficult, heroic path ahead. While pride in his sex is pointed out to a boy by adults, the girl's sexual anatomy does not receive the same reverence. Urinating also produces a sexual difference: for the boy it is a game, but for the girl a shameful and inconvenient procedure. Even if a girl has no "penis envy," the presence of an organ that can be seen and grasped helps a boy to identify himself and it becomes a kind of alter ego. For the girl it is the doll that becomes the alter ego. There is really no "maternal instinct," de Beauvoir argues, but through play with the doll the girl ascertains that the care of children falls on the mother, and "thus her vocation is powerfully impressed upon her."

Yet when she becomes mature, a girl realizes that it is no privilege to be the mother, as men control the world. This revelation helps her to understand that a father's life has a "mysterious prestige." When sexual awakening occurs, boys

are aggressive and grasping, whereas for the girl it is often a case of fraught "waiting" ("She is waiting Man"). Since time immemorial, Woman has looked to the male for fulfillment and escape, so girls learn that to please they must abdicate their power and independence.

Woman's character, de Beauvoir concludes, is molded by her situation. Women are not socially independent but form part of groups governed and defined by men. Any club or social service they set up is still within the framework of the masculine universe. "Many of the faults for which women are reproached – mediocrity, laziness, frivolity, servility," de Beauvoir points out, "simply express the fact that their horizon is closed."

### Woman and myth

Since women have rarely seen themselves as protagonists, there are not many female myths like those of Hercules or Prometheus. Women's mythical roles are always secondary; they dream the dreams of Man. Man has created myths around woman and all myths have helped to reiterate that woman is the inessential; he has revolted against the fact that he is born from a woman's womb and will also die. Since birth is tied to death, Woman condemns man to finitude.

Women have also been seen as sorceresses and enchantresses who cast a spell on man. Man both fears and desires Woman. He loves her as she is his, but he fears her as she remains the "Other"; it is this Other whom he wishes to make his. Like man, woman is endowed with spirit and mind, but "she belongs to nature and so appears as a mediatrix between the individual and the cosmos." Christianity spiritualized Woman, assigning to her beauty, warmth, intimacy, and the role of pity and tenderness. She was no longer tangible and her mystery deepened. Woman is man's muse, and also a judge who pronounces on the value of his enterprises. She is a prize to be won, the dream within which all other dreams are enfolded. On the positive side, Woman has always inspired Man to exceed his own limits.

### Final comments

What would de Beauvoir make of today's gender landscape? Particularly in richer and freer countries, many women feel that *The Second Sex* is outdated, that equality is real, or at least that the gaps in equality are bridgeable, and that girls have futures every bit as bright as boys. However, in countries where misogyny rules, and sexual inequality is written into laws and expressed in custom, de Beauvoir's book remains a potential bombshell, revealing much about the real motives of men.

The book has been criticized for being too anecdotal and circular, for not being a "proper" work of philosophy, but this in itself can be seen as a subtle attack on the author's gender by right-brained, system-building male philosophers. Indeed, that de Beauvoir is often overlooked as a philosopher only proves her point that it is mostly men who end up writing the history of disciplines – and it is not surprising that they focus first on the contributions of their own sex.

Many of de Beauvoir's assertions have been overtaken by science. The fact is that we are not blank slates in terms of gender, but are born with certain behavioral tendencies whether we are male or female. Conditioning is definitely real, as she pointed out, yet it is not the whole story, and we will only be able to counter the limitations put on women by also understanding the biological differences. The more we know about our bodies and brains, the less biology will be destiny.

If you are female, reading *The Second Sex* will remind you of the progress made for women in the last 60 years. If you are male, it will help you gain a greater understanding of the slightly different universe that woman inhabit, even today.

### Simone de Beauvoir

*De Beauvoir was born in 1908 in Paris. Her father was a legal secretary. Her mother was a devout Catholic and she was sent to a prestigious convent school. In her childhood she was very religious and considered becoming a nun, but at 14 she became an atheist.*

*Studying philosophy at the Sorbonne, she wrote a thesis on Leibniz. In a national exam that ranked students, she came second only to Jean-Paul Sartre (whom she had already met) and was also the youngest person ever to pass. Her relationship with Sartre influenced her first novel, She Came to Stay, published in 1943.*

*De Beauvoir taught philosophy at the Lycée Pierre-Corneille in Rouen, where her friend the feminist Collette Audry also taught. In 1947 she was sent by the French government to the United States to give university lectures on contemporary French literature. In the same year she wrote her popular essay on French existentialism, "The Ethics of Ambiguity." She traveled widely and wrote several travel diaries about her journeys through China, Italy, and America, which she visited several times.*

*De Beauvoir lived not far from Sartre in Paris and penned A Farewell to Sartre, a moving account of his last years. She continued her literary and activist work until her death in 1986.*