

The role of existentialism in simone de beauvoir's the second sex



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While Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is known primarily as a feminist text, it is Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy that influenced Beauvoir's writings. As existentialists, these philosophers argue that philosophical thinking begins with the human subject and not the thinking subject alone. Sartre argues that philosophical thinking starts with the acting, feeling, living human individual. For an existentialist, the starting point of a being is when one senses disorientation or dread when looking at the world. For existentialists, it is the individual and not society that determines and is responsible for the meaning of their own life. Beauvoir takes existentialist philosophy and transforms it into a discussion on feminism, racism, motherhood and many other topics. In this essay, I will show how Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy influenced Simone de Beauvoir's theories on feminism. It is through Sartre's use of the character, Inez, in "No Exit" that show how existentialist philosophy's role is played in the discussion of Hell. It is Sartre's thoughts that influence Beauvoir's thoughts on topics in this life rather than in the afterlife. In Margaret A. Simons' book, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*, the ties between Beauvoir and existentialism are laid out and offer a good understanding and interpretation of *The Second Sex* and its role as a feminist and existentialist text. When reading *The Second Sex*, one can discern that the text is simply an expression of Sartrean existentialism in the form of the question of women, displaying Beauvoir as a philosopher first, and secondly as a feminist as she transforms Sartre's philosophy and creates her own.

While Beauvoir plays a major role in Sartrean existentialism, it is important to look at Jean-Paul Sartre first. In his play, "No Exit," Sartre's philosophy is displayed well through the use of the character, Inez. Sartre's philosophical views are embedded in his characters as they play an integral part in portraying an existentialist view in the play. Sartre uses the characters' personal attributes to demonstrate existentialist thought. Each of the three characters display characteristics of sexual perversion and interaction with the consciousness. Sartre explores many existentialist themes, most noticeably, "No Exit" focuses on the ideas of consciousness and freedom. While the play's setting is Hell, the characters are taken into a room with no mirrors, no windows, only three sofas, a paper knife and a mantel piece leaving the characters exposed, raw, and bare to the reader. It is Inez that brings forth the notion of consciousness to the play. Inez's first thought about Garcin provides a great example of the distinction between knowing something and being conscious of something, Sartre writes, "Garcin: I beg your pardon. Who do you suppose I am? Inez: You? Why, the torturer, of course" (8). Without the knowledge that it is in fact Garcin and later, Estelle, that is her torturers, Inez's misconception is actually hitting at the truth. Inez offers many existentialist thoughts on consciousness. Sartre believes that consciousness is painful and he argues that humans spend much of their time with unreflected consciousness. Inez expresses this when she says, "I'm always conscious of myself - in my mind. Painfully conscious" (19). For Sartre, an existentialist must know that existence precedes essence meaning that an individual must act as an individual. Inez realizes this in Hell when she says, "So I'm done with the earth, it seems. No more alibis for me! I feel so empty, desiccated - really dead at last. All of me's here, in this room"

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(29). In this quotation it is seen that Inez realizes that it is she who determines her own fate. She is solely responsible for ending up in Hell. This is what being an existentialist means. An existentialist has the freedom to determine their own fate and to also take responsibility for their decisions. So it is seen in Jean-Paul Sartre's "No Exit" what it means to be an existentialist. It is this groundwork that provided Simone de Beauvoir with the ability to expand and transform existentialist thought in *The Second Sex*.

In Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, she takes Sartre's existentialist philosophy and transforms it into her own. Like Sartre, Beauvoir puts a lot of thought into the human struggle for freedom. *The Second Sex* lays out the groundwork for the second wave of feminism. The second wave is concerned with sexuality, family, and reproductive rights, among other things. This relates to existentialism in the way that existentialists worry about achieving freedom, or the ability to choose for themselves in good faith. In Margaret A. Simons' *Beauvoir and The Second Sex : Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*, the first line of the second chapter reads:

the question of the influence that Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre had on one another's work during the fifty years of writers analyzing their relationship has seldom been posed in a rigorous fashion...feminist philosophers who consider *The Second Sex* (1949) to be merely an application of Sartre's perspective are similarly reminded of Beauvoir's philosophic differences from Sartre when their analyses confront the sexism and limitations of Sartre's understanding of woman's situation...(Simons 41)

Simons is saying that people who read Beauvoir without a feminist lense, see Beauvoir as merely a reiteration of Sartrean existentialism. For Simons, one must recognize Beauvoir as a philosopher along with being a feminist. A man who is limited to the knowledge of being a man is more likely to see Beauvoir as an imitator of Sartre. Beauvoir writes, " man is defined as a human being and woman as a female - whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male" (Beauvoir). This again provides an existentialist reading of the text, as the men are taking on the role of telling the woman how she should and should not be; this gives the woman the sense that she is not in control of who she is. This shows that if someone is taught her entire life that to be a woman, she has to act or look a specific way, be submissive, and work only certain jobs, it is going to affect her sense of freedom and authenticity. Beauvoir writes on the domineering role men take when it comes to women, " the whole of feminine history has been man-made. Just as in America there is no Negro problem, but rather a white problem; just as anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem, it is our problem; so the woman problem has always been a man problem" (Beauvoir). She is saying that men are the people with the problem when it comes to women's issues. For Beauvoir, men have created the problems that women face. This makes life hard for a woman that identifies as existentialist. So if this is the case, for Beauvoir, being known as the woman who followed her husband's thoughts would be incredibly difficult.

While many feminist writers before Beauvoir took the form of literature, Beauvoir was among the first to view feminism in a philosophical manner. It is this form that Beauvoir takes that distinguishes her from her

contemporaries, including Sartre. Beauvoir not only examines existentialist theory but takes it and applies it to the question of women. Simons writes, “an obvious question for a feminist philosopher is whether the same process has been at work in philosophy...The Second Sex reveals that is has” (Simons 101). Simons is saying that Beauvoir is creating a new way to discuss feminism that must be read and understood differently than a work of literature. Beauvoir not only contributes to feminist thought but adds on to Sartrean philosophy in a way that Sartre, as a man, never could. Simons writes, “The Second Sex is important not only for its contribution to feminist philosophy, but for its more general contribution to existential moral and social philosophy and to our understanding of the social construction of knowledge” (Simons 101). Simons continually emphasizes Beauvoir’s influence on the wider spectrum and not feminism alone. Simons successfully displays that Beauvoir is in her own right, a pioneer of the existentialist movement. Simons later shares on page 101 that for Beauvoir, The Second Sex is the combination of existentialism and feminism. Beauvoir shares that the self needs someone acting “the other” in order to define itself as a subject. By saying this she says it is necessary for the constitution of the self as a self. This is where the two come together. As the woman acts as “the other,” this provides the reader with the perfect example for understanding Beauvoir’s view on otherness and existentialist thought on how the otherness affects everyone. Simons perfectly describes Beauvoir’s position on feminism. Beauvoir is writing as a philosopher. She is examining the entire world of existentialism and human existence and takes these thoughts and turns them into a conversation on feminism. This was one of the first philosophical texts written about the female. While her views remain <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-existentialism-in-simone-de-beauvoirs-the-second-sex/>

true to Sartrean philosophy, she expands it into a conversation that has never been done before, that of the woman.

Through understanding Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, understanding Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical writings, and being able to view the differences, one can conclude that not only is Beauvoir's writing her own but it takes the influence of Sartre's thought and transforms it into a new while still maintaining the foundations of Sartre's philosophical thought. This distinction is important to understand because it provides Beauvoir with not only the mind of a woman writing on feminism but the mind of a philosopher writing on the thoughts of all human beings. Feminism through the philosophical view of existentialism provides a unique understanding of the problem. This is the understanding that the individual woman should be able to decide her own fate. Beauvoir expresses her belief that it is men that have created the problem for women and it is exactly through her discussion on individual freedom that expresses this. Reading *The Second Sex* as an existentialist text provides the reader with an even richer understanding of Beauvoir's thoughts.