

Woman as the other and as the other woman

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), French existentialist, writer, and social essayist, passed on just over two decades ago. Putting it this way makes her ideas so much more alive. She did not just write about how she lived. She wrote, and she lived what she wrote about: she refused to be the Other, but she was also, in a manner of putting it, the Other Woman.

Simone's Life and Love(s) in Philosophy Simone de Beauvoir is now noted and appreciated as a philosopher. She was not always considered a philosopher however, but a writer, and has only been given the distinction of being a noted philosopher in more recent years.

Her works became considered "philosophical" only after her death. Beauvoir was born in France in 1908. She belonged to a bourgeois family, and had one sister. As a teenager, she declared herself an atheist, and devoted her life to feminism and writing (Marvin, 2000). Apparently, her parent's disposition and stature were a major influence on her. Her father was extremely interested in pursuing a career in theater, but because of his societal position (and with a noble lineage), he became a lawyer (which was expected), and hated it. Her mother, on the other hand, was a strict Catholic.

Some authors have noted that Simone struggled between her mother's religious morals and her father's more pagan inclinations, and this purportedly led to her atheism and shaped her philosophical work. As a child, Simone was religious and had a relationship with God. She wrote in early work about her thankfulness that heaven had given her the immediately family that she had, but this feeling (at least the religious aspects of it) dissipated as she aged (Flaherty, 2008). When she was around 15, Simone de Beauvoir decided she would be a famous writer.

She did well in many subjects, but was especially attracted to philosophy, which she went on to study at the University of Paris. There she met many other young creative geniuses, including Jean-Paul Sartre, who became her best friend and life-long companion. The group of friends that she spent her time with was considered a “ bad” group, a circle of rebels. Such perceptions did not matter however for Simone and Sartre whose fondness for each other only grew over the years. Their works were frequently linked as they read and critiqued each other’s writings, and she was sort of considered as his ‘ student’ — the Other.

However, she was not just the Other, she was a significant Other, as it were. Their relationship became intimate and Sartre even proposed to her. She however declined the proposal because she felt that marriage was such a constricting institution and that they should, instead, be free to love “ others” (Flaherty, 2008). After graduating from the university, Simone lived with her grandmother and taught at a lycee, or high school. She taught philosophy at several schools throughout her life, which allowed her to live comfortably. She spent her free time going to cafes, writing, and giving talks.

In Berlin, she spent time with Sartre and they got linked with two female students, the sisters Olga and Wanda Kosakiewicz. Sartre initially pursued Olga but later had an affair with Wanda. Note that he and Simone had agreed that they would be free to love others. During this time, Simone got very sick and spent some time in a sanitarium. By the time she left the sanitarium, Olga was married, and Wanda and Sartre were no longer lovers (Flaherty, 2008). This phase in her life, one could perhaps say, highlighted

her journey as the Other Woman. Simone traveled around the world later in her life, lecturing.

She came to the United States in the 1940s and met another man, Algren. He proposed to her, but she opted to stay with Sartre instead. Also during her travels, Simone participated, with Sartre, in the 1967 “ Bertrand Russell Tribunal of War Crimes in Vietnam. ” There she met several noted leaders, including Khrushchev and Castro; however, unlike Sartre, she did not particularly enjoy being in the public spotlight. (Gascoigne, 2002) In 1981, when Sartre died, Simone wrote a memoir about him. After this, she continued to take drugs and drink alcohol, which contributed to her mental decay.

She and Sartre had always taken drugs and alcohol. Simone frequently became drunk throughout her life. She died in 1986, and was buried beside Sartre’s remains (Gascoigne, 2002). Beauvoir’s Views: My Reflections Beauvoir strictly considered herself a writer, not a philosopher. Others did not see her as a philosopher because, in what may today be described as sexism, she was a woman and thus inferior in some ways. Moreover, she was also seen as merely a student of Sartre and not as a philosopher in her own right. On top of it all, she was a woman who wrote about women.

It must be pointed out that this field of study was not truly accepted in the academe until very recently; hence, Beauvoir’s work was not accepted as being philosophical during her time. She was indeed heavily overshadowed by Sartre, especially because some of her work reflects his (Bergoffen, 2004). Beauvoir’s philosophical ideas focused on how truths in life were revealed in literature. She wrote several essays, including “ Literature and

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the *Metaphysical Essay*” (1946) and “ *Mon Experience d’Ecrivain*,” which translates to ‘ *My Experience as a Writer*’ (1956).

Her works include both fiction and non-fiction, all in regards to studying literature in reaction to human relationships and thoughts (Bergoffen, 2004). Truly life is mirrored by literature, but literature is also a part of life, and life can be shaped by literary work. In the life and works of this trailblazing feminist writer-philosopher, one can see the reality of literature as a potent force not only of self-expression but also of life changing. Feminism was of primary importance to Beauvoir, and she is considered to be one of the pioneers of the movement.

In fact, Beauvoir is best known for her feminist work, “ *The Second Sex*,” now a classic of feminist literature (Eiermann). In this work, she looks at the role of women in society, and the advantages and disadvantages that she, herself, faced. It was initially not thought of as a philosophical work because it dealt with sex, which, during the Victorian era, was not a subject openly discussed. In reality, the book closely examines patriarchal society and its impact on women, and calls for women to take action against these oppressions.

It fired up women of later generations to fight for political, social, and personal change. The book remains debated to this day because of the way it addresses the issues, but it is still considered a major early book on feminism (Bergoffen, 2004). Here she put an exclamation point on her observations of Woman in society being seen and treated merely as the Other. Beauvoir is also known for an earlier work, *Force of Circumstance*. “

Within this piece she discussed vital issues of the day—confusion and rage regarding human freedoms and the French/Algerian War” (Flaherty, 2008).

Human freedom was a big issue that was crucial in Beauvoir’s work. She was particularly concerned that people needed to be free. This is reflected in the way she lived her own life, and in the way she lectured others. She walked her talk, and was for some time describable perhaps (albeit from a rather sexist perspective) as being the Other Woman, with no rancor, in Sartre’s life. *She Came to Stay* (1943) is another work that deals with freedom. This is a novel that deals with “ reflections on our relationship to time, to each other, to ourselves” (Bergoffen, 2004).

The work doesn’t fit a traditional philosophical framework, where questions are brought to a close and fully answered. Instead it only explores questions by looking at the lives and interactions of the main characters. In this novel, a murder is committed because of a character’s desire for freedom, and the novel examines if the murder was just or not, among other issues surrounding the situation. This work is frequently considered her first true philosophical work (Bergoffen, 2004). How many times have this student been asked this question in real life by friends and particular circumstances: freedom or life?

There is something profoundly unsettling in the questions that Beauvoir’s works raises. In *She Came to Stay*, purportedly a fictionalized chronicle of Beauvoir and Sartre’s relationship with the sisters Olga and Wanda, we are treated to an exploration of complex personal relationships. Olga was one of her students in the Rouen secondary school where she taught during the early 30s. In the novel, Olga and Wanda are made into one character with

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whom fictionalized versions of Beauvoir and Sartre have intimate relationships.

The novel delves into Beauvoir and Sartre's complex relationship. She wrote about her life, and she lived her writings. With what she wrote, she pursued her questioning, her philosophizing. *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944) is Beauvoir's first philosophical essay and a major turning point in her life as a writer. This essay looks at questions like "What are the criteria of ethical action?" "How can I distinguish ethical from unethical political projects?" "What are the principles of ethical relationships?" "Can violence ever be justified?"

"The essay looks at the moral, political, and other implications of these questions, and further explores the notion of freedom, relationships, and violence. Simone was not sure if violence was truly justified, but concludes that it is 'neither evil nor avoidable.' The questions are not truly resolved in this work, much like in her previous work (Bergoffen, 2004). Then there is *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), which further looks at ethical questions regarding freedom, and the difference between childhood and adulthood.

According to Beauvoir, children 'live in mystery,' and they should. However, she posits that children should also be forced to be adults and there could be violations of freedom involved in this. This work expands on the idea of freedom from the previous work, and looks at new dimensions of it (Bergoffen, 2004). Two themes seem to appear most prominently in the work of Beauvoir: Freedom and Feminism. The Feminine is made an agent of freedom and is problematized so in the work of Beauvoir. Today, many still turn to her work for we can see the realities that her work reflects.

We still find Woman as the Other — in some societies with her multiple burdens given her second-class status. Even in the supposedly modern nation that is the U. S. we find gender an unsettling concern in electoral politics. More broadly, freedom remains a problematic ideal in the globalizing world. Many states (e. g. , North Korea, China, Cuba, the young Republics in Eastern Europe) remain unstable at their core having had to grapple with forces of change and freedom from within and from outside their societies and territories.

At another level, the world is not lacking with individuals and groups with their various advocacies aimed at expanding the limits of freedom in civil society. Today the woman question has become the bigger concern that is Gender. This student now more fully realizes that gender is a social-psychological thing while sex is a biological or physical matter. The Woman is more than her body after is all. To be Woman is a choice, is a matter of freedom. The definition of gender lies not in the body. Gender is the realization of what you think and feel you are, and what you prefer as a lifestyle, to put it broadly.