Simone de Beauvoir, commonly known as Simone de Beauvoir (French: ; 9 January 1908 – 14 April 1986), was a French writer, intellectual, existentialist philosopher, political activist, feminist and social theorist. Though she did not consider herself a philosopher, she had significant influence on both feminist existentialism and feminist theory. De Beauvoir wrote novels, essays, biographies, autobiography and monographs on philosophy, politics and social issues. She is known for her 1949 treatise *The Second Sex*, a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational tract of contemporary feminism; her novels, including *She Came to Stay* and *The Mandarins*, and her lifelong relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre.

**EARLY YEARS**

Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris on 9 January 1908. Her parents were Georges Bertrand de Beauvoir, a legal secretary who once aspired to be an actor, and Françoise Beauvoir (née Brasseur), a wealthy banker's daughter and devout Catholic. Simone's sister, Hélène, was born two years later. The
family struggled to maintain their bourgeois status after losing much of their fortune shortly after World War I, and Françoise insisted that the two daughters be sent to a prestigious convent school. De Beauvoir herself was deeply religious as a child, at one point intending to become a nun. She experienced a crisis of faith at age 14, after which she remained an atheist for the rest of her life.\[^3\]

De Beauvoir was intellectually precocious, fueled by her father's encouragement; he reportedly would boast, "Simone thinks like a man!" Under straitened circumstances, de Beauvoir could no longer rely on her dowry, and like other middle-class girls of her age, her marriage opportunities were put at risk. De Beauvoir took this opportunity to do what she always wanted to do while also taking steps to earn a living for herself.

Baccalaureate exams in mathematics and philosophy in 1925, she studied mathematics at the Institut Catholique and literature/languages at the Institut Sainte-Marie. She then studied philosophy at the thesis on Leibniz for Léon Brunschvicg. De Beauvoir was only the ninth woman to have received a degree from Sorbonne at the time, due to the fact that French women had only recently been allowed to join higher education.\[^5\]

She first worked with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Claude Lévi-Strauss, when all three completed their practice teaching requirements at the same secondary school. Although not officially enrolled, she sat in on courses at the École Normale Supérieure in preparation for the agrégation in philosophy, a highly competitive postgraduate examination which serves as a national ranking of students. It was while studying for the Normale students Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Nizan, and René Maheu (who gave her the lasting nickname "Castor," or beaver).\[^2\] The jury for the agrégation narrowly awarded Sartre first place instead of de Beauvoir, who placed second and, at age 21, was the youngest person ever to pass the exam.\[^6\]
Writing of her youth in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* she said: "...my father's individualism and pagan ethical standards were in complete contrast to the rigidly moral conventionalism of my mother's teaching. This disequilibrium, which made my life a kind of endless disputation, is the main reason why I became an int..."

**MIDDLE YEARS**

During October 1929, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir became a couple and, by her father, Sartre asked her to marry him.[8] One day while they were sitting on a bench outside the Louvre, he said, "Let's sign a two-year lease".[9] Near the end of her life, de Beauvoir said, "Marriage was impossible. I had no dowry." So they entered a lifelong relationship.[10] De Beauvoir chose never to maintain a joint household with Sartre.[11] She never had children.[11] This gave her time to earn an advanced academic degree, to join political causes, to travel, to write, to teach and to have lovers (both male and female – the latter often shared).[12]

Sartre and de Beauvoir always read each other's work. Debates rage on about the extent to which they influenced each other in their existentialist works, such as Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and de Beauvoir's *However, recent studies of de Beauvoir's work focus on influences other than Sartre. De Beauvoir was known to have a number of female lovers. The nature of some of which she began while working as a professor, later led to a biographical controversy. Bianca Lamblin (originally Bianca Bienenfeld), in her book, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille dérange* student, she had been exploited by her teacher de Beauvoir, who was in her thirties at the time. De Beauvoir was suspended from her teaching job, due to an accusation that she had seduced her 17-year-old lycée pupil Nathalie Sorokine.[18] Sorokine's parents laid formal charges against de Beauvoir for abducting a minor and as a result she had her licence to teach in France permanently revoked.[19] She and Jean-Paul Sartre developed a pattern, which they called the "trio," in which de Beauvoir would seduce her students and then pass them on to Sartre. Both he and she later regretted what they viewed as their responsibility for psychological damage to at least one of these girls.[20]

**SHE CAME TO STAY**

De Beauvoir published her first novel *She Came to Stay* in 1943.[21] It is a fictionalised chronicle of her and Sartre's sexual relationship with Olga Kosakiewicz and Wanda Kosakiewicz. Olga was one of de Beauvoir's students in the secondary school where she taught during the early '30s. She grew fond of Olga but she denied him, so he began a relationship with her sister Wanda, instead. Upon his death, Sartre was still supporting Wanda. He also supported Olga for years, until she met and married Jacques-Laurent Bost, de Beauvoir's lover.

In the novel, set just before the outbreak of the Second World War, de Beauvoir created one character from the complex relationships of Olga and Wanda. The fictionalised versions of Beauvoir and Sartre have...
with the young woman. The novel also delves into de Beauvoir and Sartre's complex relationship and how it was affected by the ménage à trois.

De Beauvoir's metaphysical novel *She Came to Stay* was followed by many others, including *She Came to Stay* which explores the nature of individual responsibility, telling a love story between two young French students participating in the Resistance in World War II.[22]

**EXISTENTIALIST ETHICS**

In 1944 de Beauvoir wrote her first philosophical essay, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, a discussion of an existentialist ethics. She continued her exploration of existentialism through her second essay, *The Ethics of*...the most accessible entry into French existentialism. Its simplicity keeps it understandable, in contrast to the abstruse character of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. In the essay, de Beauvoir clears up some inconsistencies that many, Sartre included, have found in major existentialist works such as *Being and Nothingness*. Beauvoir confronts the existentialist dilemma of absolute freedom vs. the constraints of circumstance.

**LES TEMPS MODERNES**

At the end of World War II, de Beauvoir and Sartre edited *Les Temps Modernes*, a political journal which Sartre founded along with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others. De Beauvoir used *Les Temps Modernes* to promote her own work and explore her ideas on a small scale before fashioning essays and books. De Beauvoir remained an editor until her death.

**SEXUALITY, EXISTENTIALIST FEMINISM AND THE SECOND SEX**

*The Second Sex*, published in French, sets out a feminist existentialism which prescribes a moral revolution. As an existentialist, de Beauvoir believed that existence precedes essence; hence one is not born a woman, but becomes one. Her analysis focuses on the Hegelian concept of the Other. It is the (social) construction of Woman as the quintessential Other that de Beauvoir identifies as fundamental to women's oppression. The capitalised 'O' in "other" indicates the wholly other. De 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 chooses one's freedom.

Chapters of *Le deuxième sexe* (translated as *The Second Sex*) were originally published in 1949. The second volume came a few months after the first in France.[24] It was very quickly published in America as *The Second Sex*, due to the quick translation by Howard Parshley, as prompted by Blanche Knopf. Because Parshley had only a basic familiarity with the French language, understanding of philosophy (he was a professor of biology at Smith College), much of de Beauvoir's book was mistranslated or inappropriately cut, distorting her intended message.[25] For years Knopf prevented the...
introduction of a more accurate retranslation of de Beauvoir's work, declining all proposals despite the efforts of existentialist scholars. Only in 2009 was there a second translation, to mark the 60th anniversary of the original publication. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier produced the first integral translation in 2010, reinstating a third of the original work. De Beauvoir anticipated the sexually charged feminism of Erica Jong and Germaine Greer. In the chapter "Woman: Myth and Reality" of The Second Sex, de Beauvoir argued that "Other" in society by application of a false aura of "mystery" around them. She argued that excuse not to understand women or their problems and not to help them, and that done in societies by the group higher in the hierarchy to the group lower in the hierarchy. She claimed that it was nowhere more true than with gender in which men stereotyped women and used it as an excuse to organize society into a patriarchy.

Women who do not follow the domestic norm are looked down upon in society. The fact that I ask it is in itself significant. A man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male. But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: 'I am a woman'; on this truth must be based all further discussion. A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. It would be out of the question to reply: 'And you think the contrary because you are a man,' for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. De Beauvoir argued that women have historically been considered deviant, abnormal. She said that even Wollstonecraft considered men to be the ideal toward which women should aspire. De 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". She believed that for feminism to move forward, this assumption must be set aside.

Key concepts of the 1970s feminist movement related directly to the ideas concerning gender as a social construct presented in de Beauvoir's The Second Sex. Despite her contributions to the French Women's Liberation Movement, and her beliefs in women's economic independence and equal education, de Beauvoir was reluctant to call herself a feminist. However, after observing the resurgence of the feminist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, de Beauvoir stated she no longer believed a socialist revolution to be sufficient enough to bring about women's liberation. She publicly declared herself a feminist in 1972, in an interview with Le Nouvel Observateur.

THE MANDARINS
Published in 1954, The Mandarins is set just after the end of World War II and won her France's highest literary prize, the book follows the personal lives of philosophers and friends among Sartre's and de Beauvoir's inner circle, including her relationship with American writer Nelson Algren, to whom the book was dedicated. Algren was outraged by the frank way de Beauvoir described their sexual


**LATER YEARS**

De Beauvoir wrote popular travel diaries about time spent in the United States and China and published essays and fiction rigorously, especially throughout the 1950s and 1960s. She published several volumes of short stories, including *The Woman Destroyed*, which, like some of her other later work, deals with an older generation. 1980 saw the publication of *When Things of the Spirit Come First*, a set of short stories centering on and based upon women important to her earlier years. Though written long before the novel *She Came to Stay* at the time consider the stories worth publishing, allowing some forty years to pass.

Sartre and Merleau-Ponty had a longstanding feud, which led Merleau-Ponty to leave the journal. Beauvoir sided with Sartre and ceased to associate with Merleau-Ponty. In de Beauvoir’s later years, she hosted the journal’s editorial meetings in her flat and contributed more than Sartre, whom she often had to force to offer his opinions.

De Beauvoir also notably wrote a four-volume autobiography, consisting of: *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, *Life*, *Force of Circumstance* (sometimes published in two volumes in English translation as *All Said and Done*). In the 1970s de Beauvoir became active in France’s women’s liberation movement. In 1971, a list of famous women who claimed to have had an abortion, then illegal in France, was published; the women had not had abortions, including Beauvoir, but given the secrecy surrounding the issue, this cannot be known. Signatories were diverse as Catherine Deneuve, Delphine Seyrig and de Beauvoir’s sister Poupette. In 1974, abortion was legalised in France.

Her 1970 long essay *La Vieillesse* (*The Coming of Age*) is a rare instance of an intellectual meditation on the decline and solitude all humans experience if they do not die before about the age of 60.

In an interview with Betty Friedan, de Beauvoir said: No, we don’t believe that any woman should have this choice. No woman should be authorised to stay at home to bring up her children. Society should be totally different. Women should not have that choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one. It is a way of forcing women in a certain direction.

In about 1976 de Beauvoir and Sylvie Le Bon made a trip to New York City in the USA to visit a farm. In 1981 she wrote *La Cérémonie Des Adieux* (*A Farewell to Sartre*), a painful account of Sartre’s last years. In the opening of *Adieux*, de Beauvoir notes that it is the only major published work of hers which Sartre did not read before its publication.

After Sartre died, de Beauvoir published his letters to her with edits to spare the feelings of people in their circle who were still living. After de Beauvoir's death, Sartre’s adopted daughter and literary heir Arlette Elkaïm would not...
let many of Sartre's letters be published in unedited form. Most of Sartre's letters available today have de Beauvoir's edits, which include a few omissions but mostly the use of pseudonyms. De Beauvoir's adopted daughter and literary heir Sylvie Le Bon, unlike Elkaïm, published de Beauvoir's unedited letters to both Sartre and Algren.

De Beauvoir died of pneumonia in Paris, aged 78.¹ She is buried next to Sartre at in Paris.

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TRANSLATIONS

Patrick O'Brian was de Beauvoir's principal English translator, until he attained commercial success as a Philosophical Writings (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 2004, edited by Margaret A. Simons et al.) contains a selection of essays by de Beauvoir translated for the first time into English. Among those are: *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, discussing tl
previously unpublished chapters from her novel *She Came to Stay* and an introduction to *Ethics of Ambiguity*

**PRIZES**

Prix Goncourt, 1954  
Jerusalem Prize, 1975  
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