

The Second Sex, by Simone de Beauvoir

After rummaging through the Internet and libraries for information on scolding caps, I realised it was time to stop searching and change the subject of my web contribution. It seems the patriarchal authority has done a very thorough job of erasing the traces of this terrible punishment inflicted on women in earlier times. Therefore, in an attempt to ask forgiveness for the wrong that was done by my predecessors, I decided to work on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. This book is actually a thorough study of the causes of women's inequality.

Short Biography: Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris in 1908.

Her father was a lawyer who had great respect for the arts and always encouraged de Beauvoir's love for literature. On the other hand, her mother came from a wealthy bourgeois family and she tried to raise her daughters in the Catholic faith. This became a source of tension between Simone and her mother when she decided to turn her back on religion. In 1929, her childhood friend



Elizabeth Mabile died and although it was claimed to be from meningitis, de Beauvoir always believed it was caused by Mabile's resistance to her arranged marriage. This event tainted many of de Beauvoir's later works on the bourgeoisie. Realising Simone would need a career of her own, her father encouraged her in her love for education. She studied at the École Normale



Supérieure of France where she met Jean-Paul Sartre, who later became her lifelong companion, although they never married. Living by the ideologies she believed in, she never married him and they had a very open relationship, which didn't keep them from spending their whole life

together. She worked as a teacher in the 1930's until the German invasion got her fired. From then on, she started concentrating on writing novels and essays. In 1945, helped by Sartre and other colleagues, she founded *Le Temps Modernes*, a monthly political journal. It was in 1949 that she published her most controversial work, *The Second Sex*. In the late 1950's she started working on her four part auto-biography; *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, *The Prime of Life*, *Force of circumstances* and *All Said and Done*, which was published in 1972. She died in 1986, six years after the death of Sartre.

The Book: *The Second Sex* is actually made up of researches on the reasons for women's oppression by men through time. The main thesis of the book is that women are considered as the other in opposition to men who are the self. This comes from the natural human quest to understand ourselves in opposition to "other". The problem is that this logic is flawed when it comes to the comparison between men and women because this principle doesn't apply to gender. Trying to answer the question "how "female humans" came to occupy a subordinate position in society?", de Beauvoir studies biology, psychoanalysis and historical materialism. These disciplines all prove essential differences between men and women but they don't give reasons for women's inferiority, they only take it for granted. Therefore, Simone goes further back in time and studies history where she still doesn't find arguments for women's inferiority except that it is accepted as common knowledge. This leads her to study mythology where she understands that women's role in birth has always been seen as wonderful but terrifying by men. This led men to insure dominion over women in order to lower their weight in the balance of humanity. With that covered, de Beauvoir switched her focus to proving that women are not born feminine but rather influenced by countless events through their growth in becoming submissive. She explains that mothers mainly occupy three main roles; wife, mother and entertainer. In that

light, it is no surprise to her that women of all time have always been limited to subordinate roles. In the conclusion of her book, she discusses the difficulties women have in breaking free of the subordinate role. She states that it's only through economic autonomy that a woman can hope to be rid of her feminine role in life.

Interesting links:

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/index.htm>

<http://www.powells.com/biblio/0679724516?&PID=31879>

Related works:

Butler, Judith, 'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex' in *Yale French Studies*, No. 72 (1986), pp. 35-49.

Simons, Margaret, 'The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What's Missing from The Second Sex' in *Beauvoir and The Second Sex* (1999), pp. 61-71

Simons, Margaret, 'Beauvoir Interview (1985)' in *Beauvoir and The Second Sex* (1999), pp. 93-94

Moi, Toril. [It changed my life!](#) *The Guardian*, January 12, 2008.