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# “Becoming a Woman”: Interpretations of Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The*



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## INTRODUCTION

Simone de Beauvoir’s theory and feminism within *The Second Sex* (1949) is heavily debated whether it is transgender-inclusive or not, particularly because of her words “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”. When examining interpretations of de Beauvoir’s quotation and theory in the decades since publication, there arises a greater question of how contemporary feminist theory may utilize past influential theory while promoting progress within the field. Through pulling significant quotations from *The Second Sex* and several interpretations of de Beauvoir’s intentions and meanings, I would like to demonstrate a larger issue at hand: the costs and benefits of viewing past texts through a modern lens and explore the question of how to employ these texts without relying too much on the past.

## WITHIN *THE SECOND SEX*

tive quality of a poppy. But conceptualism has lost ground: biological and social sciences no longer believe there are immutably determined entities that define given characteristics like those of the woman, the Jew, or the black; science considers characteristics as secondary reactions to a *situation*. If there is no such thing today as femininity, it is because there never

the oblique, there is an absolute human type that is masculine. Woman has ovaries and a uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her in her subjectivity; some even say she thinks with her hormones. Man vainly for-

Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her. From a man’s

only correlatively. But it has to be pointed out first that the very meaning of *division* of the species into two sexes is not clear.

that exists concretely but the body lived by the subject. The female is a woman, insofar as she feels herself as such. Some essential biological

tance like the clitoris plays a primary role in it. Nature does not define woman: it is she who defines herself by reclaiming nature for herself in her affectivity.

“complex,” “tendencies,” and so forth imply this. But a life is a relation with the world; the individual defines himself by choosing himself through the world; we must turn to the world to answer the questions that preoccupy us. In particular, psychoanalysis fails to explain why woman is the

In order: page 4; 5; 21; 21; 49; 49; 58

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

How can we reconcile with shifting notions of becoming a woman through a Beauvoirian lens?

Are these writers reimagining Simone de Beauvoir’s feminism in an effective and productive way?

What can these conflicting interpretations tell us about how we should appropriately read and utilize former texts?

INTERPRETATION

PROJECTION

PRODUCTION

“Sex and Gender in *The Second Sex*” (1986)

- First piece of theory that reads the sex/gender distinction into the text
- Uses de Beauvoir’s discussion of frivolity of biological justifications for women’s oppression to assert her belief in gender fluidity
- Large focus on the quotation “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”

“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1988)

- Cites de Beauvoir’s claim of woman as a historical situation rather than a natural fact and says that gender applies to this claim by extension
- De Beauvoir does not discount biology entirely, but it’s not the only factor accounted for when the body develops meaning
- Uses de Beauvoir’s quotation to demonstrate that the body can only be defined through the ways in which it moves about the world, or the “stylized repetition of acts” it performs

“What is a Woman? Butler and Beauvoir on the Foundations of Sexual Difference” (1997)

- Responds directly to Judith Butler, writing against the notion that de Beauvoir implies a voluntarist view of gender
- *The Second Sex* is not a theory of gender at all but rather a theory of the meanings behind gender differences and binaries
- Readers are wrongly imposing an Anglo-American feminist concept onto de Beauvoir’s work

“What is a Woman? Sex, Gender, and the Body in Feminist Theory” (1999)

- Critiques Butler’s interpretations of de Beauvoir and argues against viewing de Beauvoir through the lens of the 1960’s sex/gender distinction
- Biology takes too big a role in *The Second Sex* for anyone to claim that de Beauvoir would discount the body entirely
- The body does not define a person, but it does define the situation one is placed in—the reactions to this situation are what define gender

JUDITH BUTLER

SARA HEINÄMAA

TORIL MOI

## CONCLUSION

It is impossible to discern today what Simone de Beauvoir intended in her 1949 text. This is one of the dangers of reinterpreting older texts through modern lenses. However, it also allows for freedom and longevity in what texts we choose to uphold throughout time and changing cultures. The continuous recycling of older texts in conversation allows these texts to develop new meanings and understandings. It also allows us to reconcile with shifting ideas surrounding gender without completely disregarding the work of important thinkers. Through the ongoing conversation and debate of these three authors, we may examine our own habits when we read texts, discerning a clearer line that may allow us to interpret texts in thoughtful and productive ways without projecting our own modern agendas onto them.

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