



Beauvoir, Simone de (1908-1986)

by Ann Cothran

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Simone de Beauvoir is best known for her revolutionary study of women's condition, *The Second Sex* (1949), a work that changed women's lives worldwide. In 1999, an international colloquium was held in Paris to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *The Second Sex*. The conference included a number of papers on Beauvoir and lesbianism, a topic that, a decade earlier, would have been virtually unthinkable.

In 1990, however, when Beauvoir's journals and two volumes of her letters to Jean-Paul Sartre were made available, it became clear that Beauvoir had had a number of same-sex relationships throughout her life. These revelations, along with others, completely shattered the heretofore unassailable myth of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre as the twentieth century's most perfect couple. Today, Beauvoir's same-sex relationships are widely acknowledged, although attempts to excuse them (as "bohemian existentialist experimentation," to give but one example), in the interest of preserving Beauvoir's heterosexual image, persist.

Beauvoir was born on January 9, 1908 in Paris into a bourgeois Roman Catholic family. Her family's fortunes declined after World War I, but she was nevertheless the beneficiary of an expensive private education. She then studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, where she met Sartre in 1929.

From 1931 to 1941 Beauvoir taught philosophy in secondary schools in Marseilles, Rouen, and Paris. In 1943, she published her first novel, *L'Invitée*, one of several fictional works dealing with her relationship with Sartre.

Although she herself seems not to have been involved in resistance efforts during the Nazi occupation of Paris, in 1945, soon after the end of World War II, she published *Le Sang des autres*, a novel reflecting on the question of political involvement and the French Resistance.

The feminist classic *The Second Sex* followed in 1949 and was eventually to make her reputation. Her strongest novel, *Les Mandarins*, appeared in 1954; a semiautobiographical work, it too focused on her relationship with Sartre, the subject that has preoccupied both her autobiographical works and the scholarship devoted to her life and work.

Beauvoir's same-sex relations, characterized by intense emotion and in most cases with a confirmed sexual component, likely began with Beauvoir's school friend "Zaza." (For a complete account see the chapter "Lesbian Connections" in Simons.) Several of these relationships occurred during Beauvoir's career as a philosophy teacher during the 1930s and 1940s, and involved her students (who seemed to be the initiators, able to resist neither Beauvoir's physical nor her intellectual magnetism).

In one case, Beauvoir's *rendez-vous* were structured around philosophy lessons. Exasperated at having to discuss Kant before climbing into Beauvoir's bed, the student Nathalie Sorokine called Beauvoir "a clock in a refrigerator." When Sorokine's mother complained to the school, Beauvoir was fired, effectively ending her teaching career.

When Beauvoir was asked point blank in an interview if she were a lesbian, she angrily denied it. It should be noted, however, that Beauvoir tended to define things narrowly (she also claimed she was not a philosopher, again according to a strict definition). For Beauvoir, a lesbian is a woman who refuses to have anything (sexual) to do with males.

Further, Beauvoir was a major participant in the public erasure of her lesbian identity. A comparison of the unpublished diaries with published works shows a very different representation of the relationship with Zaza in Beauvoir's autobiography *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958) or of Beauvoir's lover Olga as the fictional Xavière in her novel *She Came to Stay* (1943). It has only recently been recognized that Beauvoir was the model for the lesbian Inès in Sartre's *No Exit* (1944).

Beauvoir's most explicit writing on lesbianism is found in a single chapter in volume II of *The Second Sex*, "The Lesbian." Claiming that all women are "naturally homosexual" (she doesn't explain what she means by this, but it seems to have something to do with a predilection for soft skin), Beauvoir distinguishes the lesbian from the heterosexual by her exclusive "refusal of the male and her taste for feminine flesh."

At first reading the chapter seems confused, contradictory, and filled with outrageous statements. It has even been called homophobic. But not only has it always been considered the first serious philosophical treatment of lesbianism, we can see in retrospect the large extent to which the chapter anticipates current issues of lesbian identity and the performance of gender.

Beauvoir sees lesbianism as a choice, *not* in the sense of the religious right's use of the term as a weapon against gays and lesbians, but in the existentialist concept of an attitude adopted in situation, for which one freely and fully takes responsibility. Furthermore, Beauvoir's representation of the lesbian couple *per se* (which she adapts from Colette), makes possible the kind of nurturing, creative subject-other relations that Beauvoir had always sought. Her conception of a reciprocal relation in which each partner maintains her autonomy contrasts markedly with Sartre's (and Hegel's) annihilating clashes between consciousnesses.

In the early 1960s, Beauvoir began a relationship with Sylvie le Bon which lasted to the end of Beauvoir's life. In 1980, following Sartre's death, Beauvoir adopted Sylvie so that the latter could legally care for Beauvoir, who was to die six years later. Their relationship offers a model of the lesbian couple described theoretically in *The Second Sex*.

While Beauvoir categorically denied it was a lesbian relationship, le Bon did not. Although le Bon refused to be more explicit, she seemed to suggest that Beauvoir's denial was aimed at protecting the younger woman, which would not be surprising given Beauvoir's earlier experiences. Yet Beauvoir described Le Bon as the "ideal companion of my adult life," explaining that, since Zaza's early death, she had often desired an "intense, daily and total relationship with a woman." Now that she had found Sylvie, their relationship was "absolute," one in which each lived "entirely" for the other.

Beauvoir's active participation in the public silence surrounding her same-sex relations had the consequence of excluding her from the field of lesbian studies. Now, thanks to well-documented evidence and a more receptive climate, the philosopher can take her rightful place as a woman who passionately loved women.

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About the Author

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