

Simone de Beauvoir

By Allison Gillette

Personal Reflection

After researching Simone de Beauvoir I learned how important it is to live by beliefs and not compromise yourself for anyone. She never apologized for who she was or what she believed in. She lived her life the only way she could, free from societies prejudices and control, which is a difficult endeavor. I was also unaware of her fight for human rights, I thought the idea of human and woman's rights being inseparable shows even more how women are human and deserve equality in their lives. She really is an excellent role model for women. Her biggest fear was being caged into marriage and losing herself and she did everything she could to ensure that would never happen, most women would not have stood their ground like that for their whole lives.

Biography

The expectations of women in France in the early 1900's would make a modern feminist shudder. Upper and middle classes were becoming more concerned with their daughter's education, most girls were educated but not in universities. Arranged marriages were still the norm and dowries still paid to the in-laws. Women were expected to marry, bear children and obey their husbands. France was not progressive in the battle for women's suffrage. But, like the rest of Europe World War I changed everything; women were asked to deviate from their lives and aid the war efforts. They worked in factories, on the street and took over men's jobs. They were allowed to taste independence for the first time.¹ Had her family been an average bourgeois family Simone de Beauvoir may not have become the independent human rights activist she did. She ignored societies rules so she could live as she pleased, free from anyone's control or influence. It was her disregard for society that made Simone de Beauvoir an incredible woman who made her mark on this world.

Simone's family did not follow the rules of normal bourgeois society. Due to her Grandfather's financial fraud her well off, middle class family status quickly fell. She lived in Montparnasse; a quiet, rural quarter of Paris where intellectuals and artists drank coffee and horse drawn carriages ruled the streets. Montparnasse would become the backdrop of her life; the few years she lived elsewhere she felt exiled from the world. At three she learned to read, but before long she put her books and dolls aside to aid in the war efforts like all good French citizens. It was during this period she realized her family was different, a mentality she would hold onto and help form her later ideas. They did not join their neighbors in the basement during air raids; they stayed together in their apartment.² It was her father's mentality that they would either survive together or die together that drew this family close.

Many philosophies, teachings, people, actions and events influenced Simone. She read and enormous amount of literature and always stayed up-to-date with current events; however there are some specific people in her life whom she confided everything to. While on summer vacation after the war ended she met one of them. "...it was as if without any warning, the whole world had died... when Zaza came back, we began to talk...my tongue was suddenly loosened, and a thousand bright suns began blazing in my breast; radiant with happiness..."³ Zaza⁴ would be her best friend, teacher and confidant for the next twelve years. Besides her sister Helene,

¹ Renate Bridenthal, Susan Mosher Stuard & Merry E. Wiesner eds., Becoming Visible: Women in European History (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), Ch. 13.

² Claude Francis & Fernande Gontier Simone de Beauvoir: A Life... A Love Story (New York: St Martin's Press, 1985), p. 31.

³ Ibid., p. 40

⁴ Simone referred to her as Zaza in her letters; her real name was Elizabeth L.

Zaza was the only person who formed Simone's young life; she was her only friend whom she felt close to. They begged their parents to remain at the same school. Zaza's family was proper society, though Zaza herself seemed immune to the teachings of her parents and of being a proper young woman. Together they shared everything; philosophy, fears, dreams. It was through Zaza's friendship that Simone regained the self-confidence she had lost during her teenage years. Zaza gave back what Simone had lost in her parents, someone to believe in her and give her strength to be independent. Simone's parents told her she would not amount to anything, that her high education would only cause distress and problems in her life. They told her she would never get married; her intelligence made her think like a man and thus made her tainted goods.⁵ This was difficult for her to hear. What started as support from her father turned into resentment and shame. Simone would never try and appease her parents again. She never married and raised a family and she openly admitted to having casual sex with men. She wasn't rebelling against her family, she was living her life as she wanted, free from societies rules. To be free in Paris in the 1930's you lived in Montparnasse.

During her University years she was reintroduced to Montparnasse after years of "exile." What was once a rural neighborhood had changed into a bohemian quarter with bars, cafes, restaurants and electricity! Here Simone drank, smoked, danced with men and did as she pleased without guilt or shame. It was here she could live the independent life that she controlled; she was home. But like all tragic stories her happiness was not to last. Zaza's parents no longer supported their friendship. They feared Simone's wild influence and sent Zaza away to school. She fell in love but the man could not marry her and she was heartbroken and fell to depression. At the age of twenty one Zaza succumbed to fever and delirium and died.⁶

That same year Simone met Jean-Paul Sartre, the man who would become her lover, teacher, confidant and best friend until the day she died. Sartre and Simone agreed never to marry, never to live together and to an open relationship, one they could explore other relationships and while maintaining honesty. This relationship became infamous later in their lives; two intellectuals in an open relationship and remaining happy in love. Simone's life revolved around her independence, she even denied marriage when it would have allowed the lovers to live near each other. It was her independence that brought out her fight for women's equality. *The Second Sex* began as a reflection of herself as a woman and what it meant to be a woman, it quickly turned into a revelation of masculinity. "...this was a masculine world, my childhood had been sustained by myths invented by men and I had not reacted to them at all the same way a boy would have. I became so interested that I abandoned the project of a personal confession to devote myself to the feminine condition in general"⁷. *The Second Sex* deals with recurring ideas of feminism and women empowerment. Simone argues to be a woman is not to be an abnormality of society. Women should not strive to be like men, they are not men and need to be seen as separate but equal human beings. Until this mentality is changed women will never be seen as equal.⁸ It was her radical way of confronting this idea that made Simone an infamous feminist.

Simone no longer worried about societies opinions of her life. When they were angered by her stance during the Algerian Independence War she did not care. All she saw was a violation of human rights by the French government and she wanted it stopped. She had gained a reputation for honesty and accuracy in difficult situations. Because of her impartial writing ability she was invited all over the world in the 1950's and 1960's when travel was risky. Her travels included China, Cuba, USSR, Brazil and Israel to name a few. To Simone human rights

⁵ Claude Francis & Fernande Gontier *Simone de Beauvoir: A Life... A Love Story* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1985), p. 53.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83-86

⁷ Jean Leighton, *Simone de Beauvoir on Woman* (London: Associated University Press, 1975), p.25.

⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1952)

and women's rights were inseparable,⁹ she viewed any violation of rights as a worthy cause. Her strong views on human rights allowed her to be apart of the Russell Foundation, a committee designed to review American actions in Vietnam to find if they violated human rights.

Rather than settling into a quiet retirement, at 62 Simone became even more radical. In 1970 a manifesto to legalize abortion was handed to her to sign and give her support. Not only did she sign it but also she led the fight. Her office was transformed to their headquarters and she became president of the Choisir Association. Their goals were to make contraception more readily available, to have laws making abortion illegal repealed and to assume the costs to defend women who were accused of having an abortion.¹⁰ It only took them five years for the Veil Act legalizing abortion to be passed.

Though the years caused a tension among the lovers they still respected and loved one another. Jean-Paul Sartre died in April of 1980; but there last joint work was done in 1974. In her final years she became reclusive surrounded by books and papers in her Montparnasse apartment. After Sartre's death Simone said, "His death separates us, my death will not reunite us."¹¹ Even then she was a realist and not a romantic. On April 14, 1986 Simone de Beauvoir died of pulmonary edema. She was buried next to Sartre in Montparnasse Cemetery six years to the day after Sartre passed on April 19th.

It was Simone's pioneering efforts that brought many changes in woman's conditions. She proved a woman could be independent and educated like a man and still find love and happiness. Her philosophies from *The Second Sex* made women's studies and intricate part of university teaching. She proved she did not have to live the life society deemed appropriate to be intelligent, independent, self-confident and admired by thousands. Simone fought for human rights, for every human to have basic freedoms and live their lives as they want. Her life is a testament to her values; she never gave into society. She was a strong, independent woman whose influence will continue to impact society for decades to come.

⁹ Claude Francis & Fernande Gontier Simone de Beauvoir: A Life... A Love Story (New York: St Martin's Press, 1985), p. 310.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 337-340

¹¹ Ibid., p. 362

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bridenthal, Renate, Susan Mosher Stuard & Merry E Wiesner, eds. Becoming Visible: Women in European History. Boston, MA: Houghton Muffin Company, 1998.

An in depth history of women and the changes in society from ancient Egypt to present.

De Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex. New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc, 1952.

Woman can break from the “weaker sex” label and become equal to men, these rules of inferiority were created by men and need to be broken by women.

Francis, Claude & Fernande Gontier. Simone de Beauvoir: A Life...A Love Story. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985.

An in depth biography of Simone which chronicles all of her formative experiences, people and accomplishments along with the events of the world.

Leighton, Jean. Simone de Beauvoir on Woman. London: Associated University Press, 1975.

A collection of notes and themes from some of de Beauvoir's books that dealt with the topic of women and the philosophies that come from these writings.

Time Line

1908 – Simone Lucie Ernestine Marie Bertrand de Beauvoir was born January 9th

1914 – 1918 – World War I

1918 – Summer, meets Elizabeth L. (Zaza)

1922 – Lost faith in God; Father became verbally abusive, awkward early teenage phase

1925 – Corsets dismissed as torture, women cut their hair and wore skirts above the knee
- Baccalaureate in Latin and Literature from Ecole Normale Libre in Neuilly;
reintroduced to Montparnasse culture

1927 – Broke free of parents control; Zaza sent away to school

1929 – Becomes first woman to teach philosophy at boy's lycee, Zaza dies, meets Sartre
and begins their romance; 2 year contract with Sartre for no contingent lovers
- Stock Market Crash in America

1933 – Hitler was in power, Nazism on the rise, Sartre served military in near Germany

1939 – 1945 – World War II
1939 – Hitler and Stalin signed nonaggression pact; war was inevitable
1941 – Father died; banned from teaching in France
1944 – Women gained the right to vote in France
1949 – Vol. 1 & 2: The Second Sex published
1954- 1962 – Algerian War of Independence
1954 – The Mandarins published; received Prix Gencourt for Mandarins
1958 – 1969 – Charles De Gaulle President of France
1963 – Mother dies
1965 – 1973 – Vietnam War
1966 – asked to join Russell Foundation about Human Rights in Vietnam
1970 –Manifesto to legalize abortion
1975 – Jerusalem Prize recognizing those who promote the concept of freedom of the individual; Sonning Prize from Danish Government
- Veil Act passed in France; Abortion made legal
1980 – Jean-Paul Sartre died, buried on April 19
1986 - Simone died of pulmonary edema, buried on April 19