

## The Girl and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*: Feminine Becomings

### Abstract

This article traces the girl in *The Second Sex* (1949) as a necessary figure for understanding what it means to become woman. I argue that Simone de Beauvoir's overall significance and philosophical contribution is intimately connected to what she discovered by asking about this moment of feminine becoming. My central contention is that we cannot understand how one 'becomes' woman without first/also undertaking the task of understanding the situation of the girl. Drawing on the new translation of *The Second Sex* by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (2010), I offer a close reading of the chapter entitled 'The Girl' with attention to embodiment and temporality. In so doing, I seek to expand and refine our understanding of Beauvoir's philosophical project in *The Second Sex*; a project which launched a fundamental challenge to the meaning of being and gave rise to the possibility of a feminist philosophy.

### Keywords

Simone de Beauvoir, the girl, becoming, feminist philosophy, existentialism, phenomenology, embodiment.

'Qu'est-ce qu'une femme?' or 'What is a woman?' is the question Simone de Beauvoir asks in the introduction of *Le deuxième sexe* — *The Second Sex* (1949, 13; 2010, 5).<sup>1</sup> The question is a philosophical one, which is explored across two vast volumes: *Facts and Myths* and *Lived Experience*.<sup>2</sup> Despite the specific interrogative pronoun used here, scholars have argued that *The Second Sex* is in fact not about *what* woman is, but *how* (Arp 1995, 161; Heinämaa 2003, 68). Still a philosophical question, it becomes one of a different order; namely, a feminist one that seeks to develop a philosophy of sexual difference. Asking the question *how* rather than *what* makes sense following Beauvoir's existential-phenomenological framework, which takes the perspective that there is no essential truth of being to be discovered, and—since there is no truth to woman—we cannot ask *what* woman is. As such, 'her writings', Sara Heinämaa suggests, 'introduce us into an alternative understanding of philosophizing' (2003, 4). If *The Second Sex* engages with *how*, meaning 'by what means', then crucial to the question of woman is *how* exactly one 'becomes'. Beauvoir emphasizes that '*to be* is to have become' (2010, 13). The second volume, *Lived Experience* [*l'expérience vécue*], begins with a statement on this: 'One is not born, but rather

becomes, woman' (293) ('*On ne naît pas femme: on le devient*' [Beauvoir 1949, 13]), opening a section examining the transition from child to adult. The chapters in this section approach the question of becoming woman in different ways and by exploring different formative stages. Crucial for my purposes here is the second chapter of the second volume called '*la jeune fille*' or 'The Girl'.

*The Second Sex* is, then, not only a book about the question of woman. It is also a book which initiates a space for *la jeune fille* or the girl. The importance of the girl lies not just in the project of existential-phenomenological description that we find in the second volume, although this is important too. Sara Heinämaa writes that Beauvoir's work 'is not simply founded on women's experiences, but includes also a philosophical question about the constitution of such a mode of experience.' One of the directions *The Second Sex* takes, Heinämaa continues, is to ask 'what the reality or existence of woman means' (2003, 24). The project for *The Second Sex* is to show how philosophical and scientific discourses have discounted the experience of woman, thus undermining their claims as philosophy (Heinämaa 2003; Bauer 2001).

Recognizing the challenge that *The Second Sex* gave, and still gives, to the meaning of being and reality, in what follows I will focus on the elements that the situation of the girl specifically contributes to Beauvoir's theorization of sex.<sup>3</sup> I ask: what is the specificity of the embodied lived experience of the girl in *The Second Sex*? I argue that the differential of age, and the questions that the girl raises according to her lived experience, must be taken into account in order to appreciate Beauvoir's existential-phenomenological theory of sexed existence. Ultimately, I suggest that Beauvoir's overall significance and philosophical contribution is intimately connected to what she discovered by asking about this moment of feminine becomings — the girl. We cannot understand how one 'becomes' woman without undertaking the task of understanding the situation of the girl.

## **The Girl**

The chapter in *The Second Sex* called '*la jeune fille*' or 'The Girl' points to the transition between childhood and adulthood, preceded as it is by the chapter 'Childhood' and followed by 'Sexual Initiation'.<sup>4</sup> Penelope Deutscher (2008, 140) argues that the demarcation of chapters in the second volume is significant. We must understand this not in terms of marking a trajectory of a human lifetime, but for how the chapters indicate certain positions, or types of lived experience, that need to be lifted into representation and philosophical

discourse. A simple linear trajectory cannot be mapped onto the chapters of the second volume. If this were the case then 'Lived Experience' would surely end with old age and death. Instead, the second volume is constituted of fourteen chapters within four parts: *Formative Years*, *Situation*, *Justifications* and *Towards Liberation*. These parts address different concerns within the philosophical framework of sexed existence that Beauvoir develops. For example, *Formative Years* describes the situations in which the girl, while growing up, is propelled into a destiny of becoming woman. Her independence is examined through these positions alongside the modes in which her autonomy is curtailed. *Situation* examines the different roles available to adult women and argues that woman's situation is the cause of her character, not her character the cause of her situation. In part three named *Justifications*, Beauvoir discusses three ways in which women shore up their dependency as the Other: as a narcissist, being in love and as a mystic. *The Second Sex* ends on a politically rousing note against the continued objectification of woman: the single chapter 'The Independent Woman' nestled in the section entitled *Towards Liberation*.

We can see that Beauvoir took considerable care in demarcating the chapters in the second volume. Deutscher (2008) highlights the significance of this since the experience described in each chapter in the second volume varies considerably. Deutscher is also concerned, however, with the risks that arise when one considers the experiences of a group to be 'common' (2008, 140). Distinguishing experience and applying it to a defined group risks homogenizing and erasing the diversity of actual lived experiences within such a group. This is not the case in *The Second Sex*. As Sara Heinämaa (2003) argues, *The Second Sex* is a philosophical enquiry rather than a socio-historical explanation, as is so often assumed. Appealing to lived experience was one of the ways Beauvoir challenged androcentric philosophical systems. She does not reconstruct an account of actual lived experience but investigates the relations of the sexed living body in the world. Beauvoir raises the question of the girl philosophically; through which she becomes a figure to address questions about being more broadly. Raising the question, I would contend, is as important as the discussion that follows from it. The terms in which we speak of the girl is one aspect of this. Terminology for young women and girls describe various conditions or relations, often external to themselves. The same terminology rarely describes the relations or experiences of the girl herself. Beauvoir's intervention, then, is to ask the question: how does *the girl* exist herself? *The Second Sex* offers an investigation of the meaning of this kind of being and it is to this aspect of Beauvoir's text that I now turn.

From the beginning the girl was a crucial figure in the project that would become *The Second Sex*. In her third autobiography, *Force of Circumstance* (1968), Simone de Beauvoir gives an account of the book's beginnings. She had planned to write about her own life but was prompted by a conversation with Jean-Paul Sartre to think more closely about her position as woman. Initially she did not think the question of what it meant to be woman needed much consideration. For her to be a woman, she writes, 'you might almost say it just hadn't counted' (1968, 103). Clearly it did count and by reflecting on girlhood she saw what needed to be investigated. Recalling Sartre's response, she continues:

"All the same, you weren't brought up in the same way as a boy would have been; you should look into it further." I looked, and it was a revelation: this world was a masculine world, my childhood had been nourished by myths forged by men, and I hadn't reacted to them in at all the same way I should have done if I had been a boy. I was so interested in this discovery that I abandoned my project for a personal confession in order to give all my attention to finding out about the condition of woman [*la condition féminine*] in its broadest terms. (1968, 103)

Reflecting on her formative years made the problem of *la condition féminine* appear. The girl caused a 'revelation' in this respect. It is also significant that Beauvoir had already written two unpublished novels in the 1930s, each focusing on the efforts of a girl to learn about life and overcome her situation (see Simons 1986, 176). In her second autobiography, *The Prime of Life* ([1960/1962] 1965, 542), she even criticizes herself while writing *She Came to Stay* (1943, 542) for being 'compelled to describe Hélène's childhood' in such detail. Beauvoir also, of course, gave a full account of her own experiences as a girl in her first autobiography *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958) translated as *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (2001 [1959]). Many of her formulations in the chapter on the girl in *The Second Sex* are expressed in this volume via her own experiences growing up in Paris. Across her philosophy and fiction, she again and again took up the position of the girl in her writing. These examples show that Beauvoir was always concerned with the girl.

Childhood was something to which Beauvoir paid close attention and, according to Margaret Simons (1986), this work paved the way for other philosophers, namely Jean-Paul Sartre, to see childhood as an important vector for understanding the individual. Simons contrasts Beauvoir's philosophical interest in childhood in her novels and early philosophy with Sartre's lack of engagement prior to 1950. She notes, 'Beauvoir's commitment to understanding the individual within the context of their childhood experiences is evident in all of her novels and short stories from 1931 through 1945' (1986, 176). This can be extended to her philosophical works after 1945 as well. It was only after *The Second Sex* was

published, in which Beauvoir investigates the inhibitions of a girl's sense of autonomy and embodiment, that the implications of one's childhood became a concern for Sartre. Simons' project to ensure Beauvoir's philosophy is read as a singular intervention, rather than an echo of Sartrean formulations, certainly has a stake in this question childhood.

Other scholars too have touched upon the girl in the writings of Simone de Beauvoir.<sup>5</sup> Catherine Driscoll (2002), an important voice in the field of girlhood studies, offers an interesting perspective on Beauvoir and the girl. She has argued that feminist theory tends to overlook the question of what it is to be a girl; that is, feminist discussions rarely consider girls, and if they do, it is almost never on their own terms (2002, 9). Such discourses use the girl in opposition to—or as a means to define—woman. Driscoll includes Beauvoir as illustrative of this issue. In the case of *The Second Sex*, she suggests the arrangement of the fourth part of the book, *Formative Years*, excludes girls from the situation of women's liberation by defining them as merely the process of formation. To consider the girl as merely woman-in-process is not good enough according to Driscoll; the girl needs to emerge from these pages in her specificity. More recently she has worked through Beauvoir's analysis of the girl to reassess terms used, or refocus current 'trends', in girlhood studies and feminist scholarship (Driscoll, 2013a; 2013b).<sup>6</sup> For Driscoll, Beauvoir offers an important directive of *what* we mean by the girl since she distinguishes the girl from childhood and attends to what marks this as different first from childhood and then from becoming woman. This suggests that there is a difference to being girl, a distinction which Driscoll argues is either neglected completely or approached in the field of girlhood studies only via certain concepts, such as post-feminism or girl-power.<sup>7</sup> By going back to Beauvoir, Driscoll orients girlhood studies differently whilst also underscoring the cultural significance of this moment of becoming.

### **The Ambiguity of Becoming**

Earlier I introduced the notion that *The Second Sex* is not about 'what' woman is but 'how'. If 'how', understood as 'by what means', is that which concerns the book predominantly, then it is clear that the girl has a significant role in understanding how one becomes woman. Heeding Driscoll's caution, however, I argue that the chapter on the girl explores more than becoming-woman since it also interrogates the specificity of 'lived experience' [*l'expérience vécue*] from the perspective of the girl and her relations with the world. That is, her relations to the world and to herself are described as different from that of woman.<sup>8</sup> This is the interesting paradox of the girl, since she is at the same time both being girl and *becoming*

woman. For Beauvoir, ‘to be is to have become’ (2010, 13) [*être c’est être devenu* (1949a, 25)]. This means that the girl is always becoming girl, having been a child, and becoming woman. Both directions are present in *The Second Sex* and important for this discussion.

The concept of the body in *The Second Sex* is one way in which to trace how Beauvoir’s philosophical contribution is intimately connected to the girl. The body in *The Second Sex* is a contested area in feminist scholarship, one that has been examined from many angles over the last sixty years. This has produced innovative readings alongside a wealth of generalized and simplified assumptions. I suggest, nevertheless, that a focus on the girl lifts certain aspects of Beauvoir’s philosophical project to the surface and might be a way to approach this question anew. With this in mind I will next outline my own reading of the concept of body in *The Second Sex*, and then offer a close reading of this concept in relation to the girl.

*The Second Sex* is classically existentialist in so far as the body is always conceived as a situation. We need to deduce, however, Beauvoir’s unique concerns in terms of the concept of the body. Kristana Arp (1995) and Sara Heinämaa (2003) both emphasize the concept of the body in *The Second Sex* through an existential-phenomenological framework. This acknowledges that the body is never an essence but always conceived in relation to its situation. As Beauvoir maintains, one becomes through experience rather than essence. As we discover, the body is our limit but also the perspective from which we relate to the world. She writes: ‘However, one might say, in the position I adopt—that of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty—that is the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects’ (Beauvoir 2010, 46). Both Arp and Heinämaa connect the writings of Merleau-Ponty in particular to Beauvoir’s concept of the body and argue that his concept of *corps vécu*, or living/lived body<sup>9</sup> influenced Beauvoir’s own formulation of the body as a subject of experience.<sup>10</sup> We therefore understand the body and subject as inseparable. This trajectory also marks a departure from Sartre’s account of the body. Christine Daigle and Christinia Landry (2013) draw attention to Beauvoir and Sartre’s divergent approaches to transcendence and the immanent body, as Daigle (2009, 44) also demonstrates Sartre’s failure to heed Beauvoir’s instructive position on the question of embodiment. Daigle concludes: ‘he remains trapped in a dualist, sexist, macho view, despite Beauvoir’s vigilance.’<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler (1986) also draws attention to this departure as she critiques how Sartre remains caught in remnants of dualistic thought. Although Beauvoir uses Merleau-Ponty’s, not Sartre’s, concept of the living body she does not do so without reformulating and critiquing its androcentricity. She writes: ‘woman *is* her body as man *is*

his, but her body is something other than her.’ (2010, 42) (*La femme, comme l’homme, est son corps: mais son corps est autre chose qu’elle* [1949a, 66]) Beauvoir’s response to Merleau-Ponty begs the question: if woman is her body and other than her self, what are the implications for her being in the world? This formulation also indicates a central principle Beauvoir develops: woman is split between two senses of being.

In Beauvoir’s account woman fluctuates between freedom and alienation; transcendence and immanence; subject-being and object-being. Since woman is her body, a body-in-situation, apprehending herself as separate from her body, as immanence, as object, diminishes herself in the world. ‘Woman’s drama [*le drame de la femme*] lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential’ (Beauvoir 2010, 17). According to Toril Moi (1992, 98) this is ‘the single most important passage’ in *The Second Sex*. The statement describes a fundamental mode of being to which every subject makes a claim, that of being the essential. Yet the situation of woman mitigates or overrides this central claim of being. For Moi (1992, 98) this reveals a radical theorization of sexual difference. The situation of woman produces a socially significant differentiation according to sex. *The Second Sex* suggests that there is —ontologically— conflict and ambiguity in every individual. Women are, however, fundamentally more conflicted and ambiguous as a result of their situation. Beauvoir discovers another scene of ambiguity, which is expressed as a painful split between their autonomy *and* a culture in which woman are compelled to exist as the Other.<sup>12</sup> Moi discerns two types of alienation from this account, ontological and social, with which she argues: ‘the social oppression of women [...] *mirrors or repeats* the ontological ambiguity of existence’ (1992, 98). Remarkably, the situation of woman maintains itself over two analogous scenes of conflict. The double scene of conflict disposes the individual to a specific kind existence, one that compels woman to renounce themselves as the essential and to live their body as an object.

The double bind of conflict and ambiguity is significant here because it is in the chapter on the girl in *The Second Sex* that Beauvoir returns to this issue, again and again, through the experience of the girl. Thus, when Moi calls our attention to the importance of the statement on ‘woman’s drama’ she is in fact first also pointing to the situation of the girl. Moi’s perspective is also useful for focusing our attention on the deep division that woman takes on. We need, however, a more nuanced understanding of what is meant by the ‘social oppression’ of woman as it interfaces with the notion of the body-as-situation for the girl. As it stands, an account of socialization in this way neglects the deeply phenomenological

analysis that, I argue, structures Beauvoir's theorization of becoming woman and marks the significance of the figure of the girl. Judith Butler's (1986) article 'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*' offers a valuable theoretical support in this respect. She argues that Beauvoir's analysis offers an alternative to narratives of passive acculturation because the existential perspective emphasizes the individual's active relationship to social regimes, conceptualised as 'becoming'. Butler writes, 'Over and against a less sophisticated view of "socialization", [Beauvoir] is using the existential apparatus to understand the moment of appropriation through which socialization occurs' (1986, 41). Taking *The Second Sex* as a theory of gender, Butler elaborates how 'becoming' is itself ambiguous.<sup>13</sup> She argues via her reading of Beauvoir that if one becomes woman, one is not just passively subjected to gender by culture.<sup>14</sup> Butler highlights the tension in the concept of situation which we might express as: how one is produced as woman versus the creative aspect by which woman constantly produces herself in this way, but in adherence to cultural norms and social pressures. Becoming a subject is an active process of interpretation and appropriation within the context of 'received cultural possibilities' (1986, 35). The body is a 'nexus of culture and choice' rather than an essence, or pure acculturation (1986, 45). For Butler this demonstrates a radicalization of the Sartrean concepts of freedom in *The Second Sex*. She writes: '[Beauvoir's] theory of gender, then, entails a reinterpretation of the existential doctrine of choice whereby "choosing" a gender is understood as the embodiment of possibilities within a network of deeply entrenched cultural norms' (1986, 37).

Philosophical concepts developed by Beauvoir are all too often compared to those of Jean-Paul Sartre and here we find an important distinction.<sup>15</sup> In his early philosophy Sartre ([1943] 2003) argues that the situation cannot limit the individual since it is always articulated in relation to an individual's chosen projects. Beauvoir pushes against this universalized view. According to Daigle (2009) Sartre's philosophy was intimately influenced by Beauvoir, but on the issue of embodiment he did not budge, marking a clear distinction between their philosophies.<sup>16</sup> Beauvoir's corrective to Sartre's formulation develops an embodied notion of freedom that ultimately rejects the absolute freedom of individuals. For her the freedom to act must be 'founded' in order to be realized and thus in order to do this some situations are privileged over others (see Lundgren-Gothlin 1996, 154-159). In her 1986 essay Butler pushes the question of socialization in Beauvoir's work past constructionist narratives and actively refutes accusations of voluntarism.<sup>17</sup> Butler continues, 'the tension in her theory does not reside between being 'in' and 'beyond' the body, but in the move from the natural to the acculturated body.' (1986, 39) Dodging what Butler calls



Sartre's 'Cartesian ghosts', in *The Second Sex* it follows that existence as a body-in-situation is to always, at least in part, also become a gender. Beauvoir's corrective to Sartre's dualism is vital for Butler's own theory. Taking up the ambiguity of becoming via Beauvoir, Butler extends the intervention to lift it into her framework of gender, leading toward her early conceptualisations of performativity.

Although Butler's intervention enables us to further grasp the ways in which *The Second Sex* offers a nuanced existential and phenomenological account of becoming—one that is not just passive acculturation—she does not address another aspect of becoming which concerns me here. Namely, how *The Second Sex* explores the experiences of the girl as a distinctive site of becoming. This site, while not a chronological stage does have a temporal quality. Butler's (1986) account of gender offers something quite different. This is clear in the following example where she outlines a theorization of gender in respect of its temporal qualities. Butler writes: 'Although we "become" our genders, the temporal movement of this becoming does not follow a linear progression' (1986, 39). There is no origin to gender, meaning it cannot follow a trajectory from one point to a fixed end. Gender is itself an 'originating activity' that takes place 'incessantly'. (1986, 39) It is a repeated gesture and this is the temporality of gender as performative.

There are, nevertheless, questions about temporality and experience that Beauvoir poses that remain outside Butler's scope. Butler is concerned with becoming genders (in the plural), rather than the space Beauvoir opens up for the question of woman and how she becomes. Considered only through the prism of Butlerian gender theory, becoming loses a perspective that Beauvoir's writing attends to. The perspective and questions left unanswered are, namely, what occurs at the moment of the girl; why is this such a decisive moment and why does the girl never arrives as a transcendent subject. Butler's account of the ambiguity of becoming one's gender does not theorize the transition from child to woman, nor is she concerned with transcendence. It is not a question for her, since the theory of gender she develops cannot presume an origin. It is, however, a question for Beauvoir who discerns a need to investigate the development of a subject of experience, a subject whose body-as-situation exists in time and space, and which also has a future and a history.

Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (2012) also question Butler's reading of Beauvoir from the perspective of temporality and the girl. Following Elizabeth Grosz and Luce Irigaray, Dolphijn and van der Tuin call for a feminism to come 'that works with sexual difference not as a paradox that needs to be solved, but rather as a virtuality'. (2012, 141-142) In their analysis, *The Second Sex* maintains the virtuality and indecidability that Grosz and

Irigaray advocate. The girl is significant insofar as she highlights the rethinking of ontology via these concepts. Thus, Dolphijn and van der Tuin locate the significance and potential of *The Second Sex* and feminism in the temporality of the virtual, that is, rethinking feminism otherwise than the framework of gender seen as limiting us to socio-historically established norms in the past, present and future. 'For it is no coincidence that de Beauvoir does not say that the girl becomes the woman. There is not a projection backwards of the woman of sexual binarism, onto the girl. The sexed body of the girl is not fully captured by the word "woman".' (2012, 149) They argue that Butler's framework closes down the opportunity for feminism to 'make a difference' (2012, 144) by imposing the sex/gender distinction onto Beauvoir's philosophy. The girl is important for Dolphijn and van der Tuin because the girl signals in Beauvoir's writing to a naïve ethics, and vitalist aspects, that they connect to Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-woman. Dolphijn and van der Tuin's analysis carefully resituates Beauvoir in a feminist materialist tradition, which departs significantly from the language of transcendence and immanence, objectivity and subjectivity, we have seen thus far. Via different means, they also question Butler's reading of *The Second Sex* because of the inadequacies regarding temporality and the girl. Their perspective opens up the potential of thinking the girl as an ethical project for feminism.

Returning to the question of why the girl is a decisive moment and a significant site of becoming, we must, therefore, address the concept of becoming from a different perspective than Butler that takes this into account, but without simply asserting an essential or chronological trajectory. In the final sections I will explore how the girl's experience of her body becomes an important site to investigate the means by which one becomes woman via phenomenological analyses of specific experiences and other temporalities.

### **Gendered Becomings / Feminine Becomings**

The chapters on childhood and the girl in the second volume, to a greater extent, discuss the girl's experience of her body. Since we understand that, for Beauvoir, physiological changes can only be considered important insofar as they are interpreted and reflected within culture, then it is not surprising that relatively little space is given to discussing these processes.<sup>18</sup>

The body matters for Beauvoir insofar as it is a body as situation, therefore, it is how the girl becomes conscious of these facts of the body that have the most significance on her being in the world. (Beauvoir, 2010, 354) Nevertheless, the emergence of becoming woman coincides with the changes that occur during puberty, an experience of the body characterized by

Beauvoir as a crisis. She writes in the chapter on biology: ‘It is worth noting that this event has all the characteristics of a crisis; the woman’s body does not accept the species’s installation in her without a fight; and this fight weakens and endangers her’. (Beauvoir 2010, 40) The weighty cultural meaning of the female body’s potential reproductive function also come to bear on the girl as she reaches puberty. The ‘becoming female’ of the body at this point coincides with ‘becoming woman’ as situation, inaugurating an increasingly difficult and chaotic experience of the body.

More important, however, for my purposes here are the social and psychic relations that converge with the *girl-as-situation*. For this *The Second Sex* opens a nuanced discussion of certain moments which address the distinctiveness of the situation of the girl. The complex machineries of being girl, constituted by a nexus of choice and culture, accumulating lived experience and a future narrated before her, have a bearing on how we understand the concept of becoming. This can be further elaborated with the help of an example:

For the girl [...] there is a divorce between her properly human condition and her feminine vocation. This is why adolescence is such a difficult and decisive moment for woman. Until then, she was an autonomous individual: she now has to renounce her sovereignty. Not only is she torn like her brothers, and more acutely, between past and future, but in addition a conflict breaks out between her ordinary claim to be subject, activity, and freedom, on the one hand and, on the other, her erotic tendencies and the social pressure to assume herself as a passive object. She spontaneously grasps herself as the essential: How will she decide to become the inessential? If I can accomplish myself only as the Other, how will I renounce my Self? Such is the agonizing dilemma the woman-to-be must struggle with. (Beauvoir 2010, 359)

The paragraph situates the chapter on the girl as a prime area of concern because it throws into focus the incompatibility of the styles of being available as woman, or when one becomes as such. I have argued, following Toril Moi, that the situation of the girl is one of the most important places across the two volumes where the conflict of being-subject and being-object; transcendence and immanence is foregrounded. Here we see that ontological ambiguity is hinted at but more pressing is the conflict that the situation of becoming woman produces within herself.

Pausing on this paragraph we also notice the specific phraseology ‘vocation’ used to describe femininity here and consistently throughout the chapter on childhood and the girl. Despite the threat of the vocation of femininity yet to come, the little girl has existed herself as an autonomous subject—as do little boys. Etymologically, ‘vocation’ comes from the Latin *vocare* which means ‘to call’ or ‘invoke’ and *vox* meaning ‘speech’ or ‘voice’. Femininity might thus be described as a calling. It calls upon the girl, becoming a common refrain that demands her to take up a certain mission or attitude. This also means it is

relational, thus not essential within oneself, since to be called requires a position elsewhere from which one is addressed. Femininity is therefore not conceived of as an essential quality, but as a future destination that frames the little girl's existence and directs her from without. 'Vocation' also suggests a type of work and especially a life-long dedication to one of a particular kind. Perhaps an individual is particularly suited, destined perhaps, for this work; they might even have a 'natural' talent for it. In this context the word also summons religious connotations. If we consider the etymology of *vocare*, one of the first meanings is spiritual calling, or, calling as consecration. Nuns, of course, describe their situation as a calling. Given Beauvoir's position toward religious faith, we can determine the critical manner in which 'vocation' is employed.<sup>19</sup> The use of this word also holds the trace of old social systems in which a girl who did not want to marry would have to become a nun. As a nun she would not be *la femme* but *la bonne sœur*. One calling is replaced by another, but the alternative saves her from becoming wife/woman. Femininity as vocation helps to grasp the different forces and positions available to woman to which *The Second Sex* addresses itself in the second volume in particular.

From this analysis we can discern at least two things. Firstly, Beauvoir does not conceive of a 'young femininity' specific to the little girl, instead femininity calls upon her from the start of her life, waiting for her to take up its procedures. This means that there must be a point at which femininity impinges on an individual in such a way that it becomes more than just a future vocation but becomes the reality. As Beauvoir's chapter on childhood suggests, the little girl moves with and against a myth of woman as a future. It entices and repulses her. In this sense she is incited as a woman to come and not as a girl. Thus to be a girl is to be something else than woman, from which we might argue that the girl exists as a kind of resistance to this position but also the position from which woman is made possible. The chapter on the girl attunes us to this paradox.

Adolescence is a 'decisive' moment, yet as Beauvoir emphasizes, this is a conflict which will never really be settled. It becomes the structure of her being. This is the problematic of the girl and her becoming. What it suggests is that the situation of the girl is not dependent on a chronological stage, but expresses a phenomenological constant that is initiated in the moment of the girl. The formation of the girl through this problematic persists past the time of girlhood. This is what I turn to now.

### **A Temporality of Becoming?**

Even if femininity, a 'vocation' according to Beauvoir, has been constantly imposed upon the girl from birth, the individual is still not prepared for the shock which the situation of becoming-woman precipitates. The issue of how the girl is compelled to become woman still remains. Kristana Arp (1995, 171) writes, 'the young girl, the pubescent woman does not make her body into a thing on her own account. It is with *surprise* that the young girl discovers that her body is this strange and curious object'. What, then, are the conditions that dispose the girl to apprehend her body, with such surprise, as an object? Arp continues, 'A living body can become a thing only under the gaze of another' (1995, 171) recalling that Beauvoir, like Sartre, determines the look as objectifying.<sup>20</sup> *The Second Sex* gives many examples in which an experience of a look or similar intervenes in the girl's sense of self, some of which I shall address now.

We can identify different issues or modes of being that are central to the situation of women and girls. Through literary and real life examples Beauvoir interrogates the conflict between the 'originary claim as subject', 'erotic tendencies' and the 'social pressure to assume herself as passive object', which were outlined in the long quotation in the previous section. The conflict between these positions or urges is represented by Beauvoir in different contexts that express the difficulty they bestow upon the individual. 'I know some girls, far from shy, who get no enjoyment strolling through Paris alone because, incessantly bothered, they are always on their guard: all their pleasure is ruined' (2010, 356). In another example we learn: 'Proud to capture masculine interest and to arouse admiration, woman is revolted by being captured in return [...] men's gazes flatter and hurt her at the same time; she would only like to be seen to the extent that she shows herself: eyes are always too penetrating' (2010, 375). A further example is given: "'At thirteen, I walked around bare-legged in a short dress," another woman told me. "A man, sniggering, made a comment about my fat calves. The next day my mother made me wear stockings and lengthen my skirt, but I will never forget the shock I suddenly felt in seeing myself being seen"' (2010, 331).

In many ways these moments are mundane, fragmented everyday occurrences but Beauvoir identifies them as meaningful scenes through which we can grasp how the situation of woman impinges at the particular nexus of being girl. What, then, is the structure of these experiences? Beauvoir suggests that these experiences are cumulative and iterative and it is clear that initial experiences of shock and horror, which become normalized and internalized, fundamentally shift how the girl or young woman experiences herself in the world. Sara Heinämaa (2003, 103) observes,

The idea of repetition is central to the solution Beauvoir offers to the problem of sexual hierarchy. The core of her extensive discussion is the claim that women's subjection is a human formation founded on and sustained by nothing else than repeated acts of devaluation and oblivion.

This notion of repetition and devaluation is central to why these experiences are important but they do not help us understand the specific quality of this experience for the girl. It is not as simple as just wearing the girl down. Something else happens that compels her to live her body differently, which has a lasting impact on the condition of her existence. These experiences might accumulate; they also must acquire meaning beyond the event and are reinscribed corporeally and psychically on the girl in conscious and unconscious ways. Beauvoir shows how the inevitable discomfort or unsafety felt in other moments, such as the experience of girls in public on the street, compels the body to become a site of ambiguity and conflict because the girl is forced to recognise, and try to reconcile, the split between the different positions of subject and object. Asked in retrospect, women recall these situations where, as girls, their position as becoming-object, or as the inessential, was revealed to them.<sup>21</sup> This is the formation of the girl; the phenomenological-existential account of the living body, rather than a physical or psychological change.

The way that Beauvoir's analysis approaches how woman is compelled to live her body as an object suggests a temporal dimension since *The Second Sex* suggests that woman did not always live her body as an object. Woman 'becomes' through certain formations, which according to Beauvoir, divide and bend her against her autonomous self. Taking this further, then, we can connect the events described above to a specific mode of temporality to theorize these moments, conceived as the event of an intrusion of another person. This is where Beauvoir reveals a further temporal dimension to being-girl to which I now turn.

In the schema of development outlined in *The Second Sex*, a boy-child will become an adult but the girl-child becomes something else—she will become woman. Elsewhere in the chapter the experience of the girl is characterized through language that explicitly and implicitly conjures a sense of waiting: a 'frozen existence' (2010, 351); 'her youth is consumed by waiting. She is waiting for man.' (2010, 353); 'she is still suspended between the moment of childish independence and that of feminine submission.' (2010, 359) Conceived less as arrested development and more as a loss of hope and confidence in her body-as-situation, the girl stays put since there is nowhere meaningful to take herself. Her urge to freedom is curtailed by the vocation of femininity. Alongside what appears to be a pause in being, or perhaps to explain such a state, the chapter reveals a unique temporality

associated with the girl. Commencing from an event in which a look shocks and dislocates the girl's existence, a different sense of being is asynchronously, or allochronically, installed; one that all too conveniently follows the conditions implied by femininity as a vocation. What this means is that on a certain level the girl is positioned as the object she anticipated becoming, compelling her to become what she was not already but what she was told she always was. This is similar to what Penelope Deutscher (2008, 147-148) has described as 'a corporeal, and preemptive, temporal asynchrony' and a 'dislocating temporal becoming'. In my reading of this chapter, I understand Deutscher's notion of a 'dislocating temporal becoming' as precisely related to the girl's position between child and woman. Before now the little girl has lived her body as autonomous. Even with the social direction imposed by the 'vocation of femininity', her mode of being and relating to the world was not fundamentally different from that of the little boy. Moving from childhood to the formation of the girl, naiveté and autonomy are positioned in a struggle against a body-in-situation perceived simply as flesh.

As I have suggested, *The Second Sex* argues that through accumulative experience lessons of difference and Otherness are slowly internalized, but Beauvoir's analysis suggests something more is going on. Deutscher (2008, 149) emphasizes, in reference to the many examples of girlhood experiences in *The Second Sex*, 'a seemingly sudden, a moment of punctual, instantaneous shock.' She continues, 'A narrator seems to depict a sudden moment of being jolted from one state of being to another'. We recall the woman who remembers her own shock at being seen. Cast under a look, this instantaneously punctuates and reconfigures her feeling of autonomy. In the case of the girls, whose desire to roam the streets was extinguished, we see the same thing. They are forced into the uncomfortable position of becoming object by the intrusion of a stranger in public. Their desire to walk the streets and see the city is smothered as a result. Even the girl's sense of eroticism is fractured by this. In other words, in the dislocating moment of shock, sexual difference forces itself to emerge via a look or an action. If a look is all it takes to reveal her body as object then it is a devastating look. The shock motivates a crisis—how can I live like this? Her body is a given, but given in a situation that compels her to renounce freedom.

To return to what Deutscher (2008) describes as 'anticipatory' and 'asynchronous', femininity, here, is characterized as a force that, accumulating silently, sweeps in to reconstitute a wholly different sense of self. The experiences described above offer scenes where the fact of being sexed is thrown violently into focus for an individual. Beauvoir

suggests that this occurs as a rupture in which the girl's being shifts into a radically different state, which can only happen in so far as the girl has already been induced to apprehend this mode of existence so at odds with her ontological status as subject. The social pressures exerted under childhood have meant that being woman was anticipated but not existed. Now, 'she knows the agitation of the body becoming flesh, the first revelation of woman as woman' (Beauvoir 2010, 376). As I have said, this shock of being revealed as becoming flesh never leaves the individual. When things of a similar nature happen in later life one is taken back to this moment of being-girl caught in the objectifying look of another. Thus, if the situation of the girl precipitates a double division of her being, it also forges a temporal link, suspending the passage of time to return her back to the situation of the girl. If the girl holds within her the woman she will become, then, the woman always carries within her the girl she once was.

This demonstrates that the conflict through which Beauvoir understands the situation of woman is precipitated at the moment of the girl. Beauvoir does not suggest that the girl is complicit with her oppression, but she does acknowledge there can be a desiring engagement with the process of becoming-object on the side of the girl. This is only because this is the only way the girl has relative access to power or autonomy, in an upside-down manner. Beauvoir writes, 'she understood the charm of passivity; she discovers the power in it'. (2010, 360) It is one of the paradoxes of her situation, that only by submitting herself as an object will she attain some value as woman. These sudden events described in the chapter on the girl represent one important aspect of the means by which one becomes woman, while also examining the conditions of the girl's existence itself. This means that, yes, the vocation of femininity is significant, but not without phenomenological pressures initiated in the situation of the girl that compel her to live her body otherwise, which is to say: to become woman.

## **Conclusion**

*The Second Sex* is perhaps best known for the phrase, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman' (Beauvoir 2010, 293). As this paper takes up the questions of how one becomes woman, posed by and through the figure of the girl in *The Second Sex*, I want to emphasize the significance of Beauvoir's attention to this figure. Although the discovery that one



becomes woman insists upon the importance of the girl, the key question that feminine adolescence raises still remains to be fully appreciated.

Focusing on ‘how’ one becomes in the chapter on the girl raises important insights for Beauvoir’s philosophy. Attention to the girl as another site of becoming shows how Beauvoir’s philosophy is not one of construction or socialization. Instead it examines the corporeal, social and temporal particularity of the girl for a unique account of subjectivity and being. For Beauvoir, the girl does not just take on a gender (as Butler would say) but she takes on a division at the level of her existence. Formulations that only consider socialization as a way one becomes dismiss the conflict of existence that Beauvoir’s philosophy develops with and against the body-as-situation.

I have argued that the moment of the girl is more than chronological. We have to understand the significance of the girl by means of a phenomenological constant, whose ontological effects, while arising at a certain moment, exist way past girlhood. Eva Lundgren-Gothlin (1996) critiques Beauvoir’s philosophy in *The Second Sex* for developing a view of female biology and femininity as a hurdle for the subject to overcome for historically and individually situated transcendence. When we consider the girl, however, femininity comes into play with a different quality; as a dissolution of autonomy rather than an obstacle to overcome. From my perspective, it is not a question of girlhood as an obstacle to overcome or a rite of passage to pass through. It is, instead, a question of understanding the structures and relations that implicate the girl in her own division and alienation. The problem the girl faces is not one that can be overcome but a constant fissure, and a double bind, of conflict and ambiguity.

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<sup>2</sup> Others such as Toril Moi (1994) have argued that Beauvoir was not a philosopher and did not see herself as such. In my view—following Nancy Bauer (2001); Debra Bergoffen (1997); Christine Daigle (2009); Sara Heinämaa (2003); Sonia Kruks (1990, 2011); Eva Lundgren-Gothlin (1996) and Margaret Simons (1986, 1999, 2006)—*The Second Sex* must be read as a philosophical text and it is right that Beauvoir is regarded as a feminist philosopher.

<sup>3</sup> Situation here refers to the existential concept understood as the context of existence for an individual, with and against which freedom is asserted.

<sup>4</sup> The chapter on the girl is the only chapter title that is translated differently in the English translations by Howard Parshley (1955) and Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. '*La jeune fille*' is translated word for word as 'The Young Girl' in Parshley's version, whereas Borde and Malovany-Chevallier translate it as 'The Girl'. In their translators' note Borde and Malovany-Chevallier (in Beauvoir 2010, xxii-xxiii) highlight the difference between Parshley's translation of *la jeune fille* and their own. They state, quite simply, that it should read as 'The Girl' in English because the chapter deals with the period between childhood and adulthood. Although 'The Young Girl' is a literal translation it does not perhaps capture in English what *la jeune fille* does in French. The question of translation, here, points to the slipperiness of terminology in which the girl is fixed and exceeds. *La jeune fille* is not the same as *une fille qui est jeune*, which suggests one reason why Parshley's translation was rejected in the later translation. *La jeune fille* and the girl produces a certain figure that functions not just to describe a stage between child and woman, but a stereotype conjured with and against a specific configuration of patriarchal-social structures in the cultural imaginary.

<sup>5</sup> Emily Grosholz's (2004) analysis is an important example in which she examines, from a literary perspective, the way girlhood and adolescence is described in *The Second Sex* and *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. She emphasizes the moments where Beauvoir turns to literary figures to portray the girl as tragic and hopeful. In doing so she highlights certain aspects such as the transience of her autonomy; a special connection to nature and also 'a youthful desire for the absolute.' (2004, 177) Grosholz in fact reads Beauvoir's girl as a poet of modernity, who is full of creative potential but without the social form within which it can be cast. Grosholz highlights how it is in examples from literature that Beauvoir is able to make such a statement. In the following sections, however, she shifts from *The Second Sex* to focus on Beauvoir's representation of her own girlhood via a comparison with Colette. Although Beauvoir's writing seems to draw deeply on Colette's in many ways, Grosholz argues that Beauvoir's account of her girlhood shows how she determined to leave her girlhood situation behind, namely her house and mother, whereas Colette finds refuge in the

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house and creative inspiration in the figure of the mother. For Grosholz, the girl as daughter is an important aspect which leads her to suggest that Beauvoir neglected to recognize the creative resources offered to her from her own mother but also her 'literary mother' Colette (190-91).

<sup>6</sup> Driscoll's introduction to the edited volume *Girls' Sexualities and the Media* (2013) is an important example of this. Here she states the glaring question: why open a volume on contemporary girlhood and media by turning to Beauvoir's existential-phenomenological project published way before Tumblr and YouTube existed? Beauvoir is important in this context, not least, as Driscoll points out, because she was one of the first to show the power representation has over girls and young women. The social processes and embodied formations of the subject that Beauvoir describes in the chapter on the girl are strikingly useful for approaching media technologies and contemporary girlhood.

<sup>7</sup> Girlhood studies is a relatively new scholarly field that has grown predominantly from the disciplines of media studies and education. A reliance on certain concepts and forms of expressions has arisen in its wake. Driscoll's aim seems to be to complicate the narratives told of girlhood studies and offer a more critical and nuanced perspective that all the while offers new tools for understanding the question of the girl. At the inaugural *International Girlhood Studies Association* conference in 2016, Catherine Driscoll gave a keynote address which, amongst other things, highlighted Beauvoir's writing on the girl and situated it within the genealogy of girlhood studies.

<sup>8</sup> The title of the second volume 'L'Expérience Vécue' or 'Lived Experience' comes from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and his concept of the embodied subject and living body in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002 [1945]).

<sup>9</sup> Heinämaa makes the point to translate *corps vécu* as *living body* not *lived body*. Arp uses *lived body* consistently in her essay.

<sup>10</sup> This connection is established in Beauvoir's review of the *Phenomenology of Perception* by Merleau-Ponty, which she published in 1945 in *Les Temps Modernes*. In the review she clearly agrees with Merleau-Ponty and shows how his thought diverges from Sartre's. (See Beauvoir in Simons 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Daigle and Landry (2013) demonstrate the different approaches to transcendence by Sartre and Beauvoir by investigating their perspectives on intersubjective relations. Although they demonstrate how Sartre's perspective on transcendence and freedom proves problematic when considering the weight of oppression, as analysed by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, they also identify different limitations in Beauvoir's approach. According to their analysis, following Beauvoir, emphasising the ambiguity of one's situation means that living authentically becomes, ultimately, problematic.

<sup>12</sup> Beauvoir always uses this term in a capitalized form in the case of woman to distinguish from other types of otherness described. Something can be other, but only woman is Other.

<sup>13</sup> Sara Heinämaa (1997) has argued that Beauvoir's is not a theory of gender and maintains that Butler misapplies a sex/gender distinction onto *The Second Sex*.

<sup>14</sup> Butler's reading problematizes the sex/gender distinction: 'Beauvoir's theory seems implicitly to ask whether sex was not gender all along?' (1986, 46). We might argue, following Heinämaa (1997), that Butler reinforces the distinction by applying it to Beauvoir's philosophy where gender was not a concept to begin with.

<sup>15</sup> The question of influence is taken up from a number of perspectives and in great detail in Christine Daigle and Jacob Golomb's excellent edited volume *Beauvoir & Sartre: The Riddle of Influence* (2009).

<sup>16</sup> Daigle (2009) maintains that Beauvoir's influence did shape and change many of Sartre's concepts, including a shift from his view of absolute freedom to a situated one which is one of the philosophical interventions *The Second Sex* develops.

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<sup>17</sup> In her 1986 article Beauvoir's corrective to Sartre's 'Cartesian ghosts' is an important part of her argument. Later, however, in *Gender Trouble* (1999 [1990]) she seems to change her mind. She writes 'Despite my own previous efforts to argue the contrary, it appears that Beauvoir maintains the mind/body dualism, even as she proposes a synthesis of those terms.' (1999 [1990], 17).

<sup>18</sup> It is also the case that Beauvoir dedicates a chapter at the beginning of the first volume to a lengthy study of biological facts as one step to grasp the situation of woman. In the second volume, however, her concern is taking up lived experience, with and against the meaning of biological processes.

<sup>19</sup> In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1989) Beauvoir describes her strong Christian faith as a girl, at one point deciding to become a nun. Later, in her early teenage years Beauvoir experienced an intense crisis of faith leading to her becoming an atheist for the rest of her life.

<sup>20</sup> It is important to distinguish, however, that the look that is invoked in these examples differ from Sartre's concept of 'le regard'. In particular we do not find the quality of a looked-at-look, so central to Sartre's concept in *Being and Nothingness*, in *The Second Sex*. It is, therefore, crucial to recognize that Beauvoir stakes out a distinctly different account of the field of vision and its corporeal consequences. This originates, I suggest, from her more nuanced conception of the lived body. See also, Debbie Evans analysis of Beauvoir and Sartre via the look, in Daigle and Golomb (2009).

<sup>21</sup> I defer to Fiona Vera Greys' philosophical and empirical study *Men's Intrusion, Women's Embodiment* (2017) for a detailed analysis of the impact of men's intrusions on women and girl's lived experiences.