

Paradoxes of femininity in the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir

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Abstract This article explicates the meaning of the *paradox* from the perspective of sexual difference, as articulated by Simone de Beauvoir. I claim that the self, the other, and their becoming are sexed in Beauvoir's early literary writing before the question of sexual difference is posed in *The Second Sex* (1949). In particular, Beauvoir's description of Françoise's subjective becoming in the novel *She Came to Stay* (1943) anticipates her later systematic description of 'the woman in love'. In addition, I argue that the different existential types appearing at the end of *The Second Sex* (the narcissist, the woman in love, the mystic, and the independent woman) are variations of a specific feminine, historically changing paradox of subjectivity. According to this paradox, women, in a different mode than men, must become what they ontologically "are": beings of change and self-transcendence that have to realise the human condition in their concrete, singular lives. My interpretation draws on Kierkegaardian philosophy of existence, phenomenology, and early psychoanalysis.

Keywords Simone de Beauvoir · Paradox · Subjective becoming · Femininity · Narcissism · Love

Abbreviations

CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*
EA *The Ethics of Ambiguity*
PL *Prime of Life*
SCS *She Came to Stay*
SS *The Second Sex*

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In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir famously explicates her understanding of human existence by studying how subjective becoming [*devenir*] as a singularly lived but yet intersubjective reality is necessarily sexed, and how woman's becoming entails its specific 'paradox of subjectivity' as compared to man's becoming.

The influence of *The Second Sex* on feminist gender theory can hardly be overestimated. Many scholars today acknowledge that Beauvoir's study of the phenomenological and existential meaning of sexual difference is her main philosophical contribution: in so far as one agrees that perceptual experience and the body is fundamental for human existence, a serious consideration of subjective becoming must take into account the possible constitutive meaning of sexuality and sexual difference for this becoming.¹ In line with this research, the aim of this article is to explicate in more detail the meaning of the *paradox* of subjective becoming from the perspective of sexual difference, as articulated by Beauvoir. In what sense is the paradox "sexed" and how, more precisely, does it add to our understanding of subjectivity? Methodologically, I will study two concrete descriptions of subjective becoming in Beauvoir's work. These are her systematic description of feminine becoming in *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir [1949] 1953) and her literary description of Françoise's becoming in the novel *She Came to Stay* (Beauvoir [1943] 1990).²

The paradox has had a strong philosophical bearing in Western thought. In general, it signifies a kind of reasoning in which the conclusion contradicts the premises, or which justifies two contradictory conclusions, and which often has some truth to it. In Greek, paradox is a compound of two words: *para*, meaning either 'with', in several senses (e.g., 'beside', 'near', 'together', 'along', 'past', or 'beyond'), or 'against', and *doxa*, which is often translated as 'opinion', 'conjecture' or 'popular repute', but can also mean 'expectation' (Liddell and Scott 1968, p. 444). The word *paradoxos* means 'something contrary to expectation', or 'incredible' (Liddell and Scott 1968, p. 1309). These Greek connotations receive a new meaning in the articulations of the modern problem of existence, as a problem concerning the contradiction between subjective freedom and objective necessity, to which Beauvoir's philosophy is a response.³

The Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard provides a direct description of subjectivity, or individual existence, as paradoxical in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Kierkegaard [1846] 1941). Ultimately, Kierkegaard's perspective is rooted in his view of Christianity as spirit, inwardness, subjectivity and a passionate need for personal decision, rather than what he opposes to existential inwardness and subjectivity, namely contemplation, indifference and objectivity (CUP, p. 33).

¹ Significant existential and phenomenological studies of Beauvoir's work include: Le Dœuff ([1989] 1998), Kruks (1990), Lundgren-Gothlin ([1991] 1996), Bergoffen (1996), Kate and Edward Fullbrook (1998), Pilardi (1999), Tidd (1999), Arp (2001), Holveck (2002), Heinämaa (2003), and Kail (2006).

² The expression 'feminine becoming' calls for comparisons with Luce Irigaray's claim that woman has to become the woman she is by nature, on the one hand, and with Rosi Braidotti's feminist interpretation of Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's concept 'becoming-woman', on the other hand. Cf., e.g., Irigaray ([1992] 1996); Braidotti (2003). Such comparisons would, however, go beyond the limits of this article.

³ For an original and philosophically grounded discussion of the modern problem of existence, see Hannah Arendt ([1946] 2002).

More precisely, his understanding of human subjectivity originates in Christianity's "constant use of time and the historical in relation to the eternal" (CUP, p. 88). The way in which the eternal comes into being in time is "the paradox of Christianity", and the religious means, strictly, for Kierkegaard "becoming aware of the paradox and holding the paradox fast every moment" (CUP, pp. 162, 191). A paradox, in Kierkegaard's view, is not a transitory form of the relation of the religious to the existing subject, but is "essentially conditioned by the fact that a man is in existence", that is, by the fact that the human individual belongs both to time and to eternity (CUP, p. 162). If the paradox were to be removed by an explanation, existence would also be taken away, and the paradox is to be understood as a determination of existence.

The frame of Beauvoir's philosophy of existence is not religious, but Kierkegaard's insistence on paradox as a determination of existence is echoed in her understanding of the ambiguity of the human condition.⁴ That man [*l'homme*] is defined by ambiguity means in this perspective that the individual *is* only by not being: at once a negativity [*négativité*], and, because of it, a positive desire or will to be, he or she can only be by becoming, or by accepting the fundamental tension between non-being and being that constitutes existence.⁵

Beauvoir's central argument about subjective becoming in *The Second Sex* proceeds in two steps. First, she claims that human existence is divided into two different modes of experiencing and relating to the world: the feminine and the masculine (SS, pp. 14–15, 737, 740).⁶ In addition, she argues that the feminine mode of experiencing the world entails its own paradox of subjectivity. Like any human individual, the feminine individual has to realise existence. In this sense, she is to be understood as becoming rather than being. However, in fundamental conflict with this ontological condition, which is discussed in detail in Beauvoir's ethical essays, women find themselves conditioned primarily as a determined being rather than a free becoming; as immanence more than transcendence, as the inessential in relation to the essential and as objects in relation to a superior subjectivity: man (cf. SS, pp. 16, 29).⁷

This specific paradox of the feminine condition affects women's lived subjectivity, which as a result becomes divided between objectivity and subjectivity. Objectivity here means the cultural and historical reality that is at once constituted by individual women and men, and transcends these individual lives. Beauvoir's

⁴ The phenomenological articulation of the paradoxical nature of subjectivity, in the tradition of Edmund Husserl, is another crucial source of influence for Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity. Cf. Husserl ([1954] 1970), Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1962), Beauvoir ([1945] 2004).

⁵ The word *ambiguity* originates from the Latin *ambiguitas* in ancient philosophy, where it signified the double meaning of a word or sentence (Kohlenberger 1971, pp. 201–202). Ambiguities caused controversies, and one was supposed to either avoid them or clarify their different meanings. For a related etymological consideration of ambiguity, see Monica Langer (2003, p. 89). See, e.g., also Kristana Arp (2001, pp. 47–50), who finds the origin to Beauvoir's understanding of the ambiguity of existence in the Greek tradition of thought, and Penelope Deutscher (2008), who reinterprets the concept of ambiguity in Beauvoir's philosophy politically through several aspects of alterity, such as gender, generational, racial, and cultural differences.

⁶ Cf. Heinämaa (2003, pp. 84–85).

⁷ The two essays in which Beauvoir explicates the ethical perspective underlying *The Second Sex* are *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (Beauvoir [1944] 2004) and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Beauvoir [1947] 1976).

study shows that reality is predominantly androcentric, and therefore women's modes of existence, as well as their opportunities to justify their existence, are more complex and challenging than are men's (SS, pp. 608–609). Women's individual becoming, in other words, has to take place in a situation that differs from men's, who are not torn in the same way between the values and demands of the common (androcentric) world and their personal, lived experiences. Women, in a different mode than men, *have to become subjective*, or become what they ontologically “are”, that is, beings of change and self-transcendence that, like men, have to realise the paradoxical human condition in their concrete singular lives (cf. SS, pp. 608–609).⁸

Beauvoir did not consider *She Came to Stay* a novel about sexual difference. As she repeatedly says, what she aimed to describe in this story was the problem of the existence of other consciousnesses. The concrete experience of ‘the other’ in this novel, however, is depicted through the intimate, erotic and conflictual relations between Françoise, Pierre and Xavière, and through the existential transformations of its main character, Françoise. In other words, the self and the other, as well as the problem of subjective becoming, are sexed in Beauvoir's literary writing before the question of sexual difference is posed in *The Second Sex*. In addition, and as I aim to show in this article, there are substantial philosophical connections between Beauvoir's descriptions of becoming in *She Came to Stay* and in *The Second Sex*, in that the concept of ‘the woman in love’ [*l'amoureuse*], explicated in *The Second Sex*, is anticipated or operative already in the description of Françoise's attitude towards Pierre.

The idea of an unthought or operative level in philosophical thinking assumed here has its background in phenomenological methodology. More precisely, it is indebted to the explications of the German phenomenologist Eugene Fink, and refers to a field of concepts that is “thought through”, but not really considered, thematised or explicated in itself (Fink [1957] 2005, p. 245). As distinguished from “thematic concepts”, the operative concepts are the so-called medium that reflective thought uses for its thematic concerns, but that remains unreflected, or the necessary shadow of reflective thought.⁹

The thematic-operative relation integral to Beauvoir's articulation of femininity can only become adequately understood by making explicit the presence of another “shadow” in her thought, namely the role of psychoanalytical concepts in her philosophical study of sexual difference. As is well known, Beauvoir's attitude

⁸ This does not exclude differences *between* women: being a white coffee farm owner in colonial Kenya in the 1920s, for instance, differs radically from being a black civil rights activist in Montgomery in 1955, or from being a non-Jewish writer in wartime Paris. Beauvoir's argument is nevertheless that individual women's lives are unique expressions of a shared, and historically changing, feminine condition. For critical studies of race in Beauvoir's philosophy, see, e.g., Simons ([1997] 1999), Weiss (2006), and Deutscher (2008).

⁹ This idea is also present in Debra Bergoffen's (1996) study of generosity in Beauvoir's philosophy. Bergoffen distinguishes between the specific or explicit philosophical identity in Beauvoir's philosophical discourse and her muted voice: “what might be called the un-thought of Beauvoir's thinking” (Bergoffen 1996, p. 2). This voice, which Bergoffen finds in the margins of Beauvoir's philosophical texts, articulates an “erotic generosity” that challenges a traditional understanding of the subject and intersubjectivity within phenomenological and existential philosophy.

toward psychoanalysis is ambivalent. On the one hand, she stresses what she considers to be the “tremendous advance” of psychoanalysis over psychophysiology: “no factor becomes involved in the psychic life without having taken on human meaning [*sens*]” (SS, p. 69, translation modified). With an implicit but clear reference to phenomenology, she adds that it is not “the body-object” [*le corps-objet*] of biological science that exists, but “the body as lived in by the subject” [*le corps vécu par le sujet*] (SS, p. 69). What is crucial for femininity and masculinity is the lived experience, rather than objective biological features that may not be part of this experience. On the other hand, Beauvoir holds that Freudian psychoanalysis not only rests on confused philosophical assumptions, but also fails to explain how values are involved in sexuality. By implication, psychoanalysis models the psychosexual “destiny of woman” [*destin de la femme*] on that of man (SS, pp. 70–71).

My aim here is not to evaluate Beauvoir’s critical discussion of the metaphysical and androcentric assumptions of psychoanalysis. This criticism notwithstanding, the general psychoanalytic conceptualisations of subjectivity significantly pertain to Beauvoir’s descriptions of feminine becoming in *The Second Sex*. First, it is crucial to Beauvoir’s understanding of femininity here that Freud views sexual and personal identity as the result of a process of development.¹⁰ Still more important to her notion of feminine becoming are the consequences of the psychoanalytical idea that ‘anatomy is destiny’. In so far as this idea is echoed within the French philosophy of existence, it is not interpreted as a “rigorous universality”, Beauvoir claims, but accounts for the fact that “general types may be recognized in individual histories” (SS, p. 78, translation modified).¹¹ The latter claim is central for my approach here.

According to Beauvoir, underlying each individual feminine existence is a common, historically changing feminine condition. This shared condition accounts for the general *types* or *attitudes* that, at the end of *The Second Sex*, are distinguished as specific feminine modes of realising the paradox of existence. Beauvoir distinguishes four feminine existential types or attitudes: ‘the narcissist’, ‘the woman in love’, ‘the mystic’ and ‘the independent woman’. The concept of narcissism, which was first defined in relation to sexual difference in the writings of Freud, operates in Beauvoir’s discussion of these attitudes, of which only the last is considered a potential authentic mode of becoming subjective.

Since the frame of my discussion of subjective becoming in *She Came to Stay* is sexual difference, I will begin by presenting Beauvoir’s analysis of feminine becoming in *The Second Sex*. I will then present the main insights of her novel,

¹⁰ In a public lecture on femininity, Freud ([1932] 1964) declares that psychoanalysis makes no attempt to explain what a woman is, but wants to explain how a girl, an originally bisexual child in his theory, becomes a woman through the losses and substitutions of love objects. Similarly, the establishment of male personality is a process, but one less complex than in the case of women.

¹¹ Beauvoir’s affirmation of types does not mean that she accepts any form of determinism, biological, psychological or social. On the contrary, throughout *The Second Sex* she argues that the human being is not first of all a natural species, but an existential situation. Biological facts constitute an essential element in this situation, but they do not establish a determined destiny for the sexes (SS, pp. 65–66; cf. pp. 83, 91).

in order to finally compare these two different modes of investigating feminine becoming.

1 Subjective becoming in *The Second Sex*

The introduction to the first book of *The Second Sex* can be viewed as a phenomenological reduction, in the sense that it clears the ground for Beauvoir's subsequent study of how the meaning of femininity, and of the being of the sexes, is interpreted in scientific, historical, mythical and literary discourses, on the one hand, and how it is constituted in women's lived experiences, on the other hand.¹² As Beauvoir writes, her aim is first of all to study "the light in which woman is viewed by biology, psychoanalysis and historical materialism", and then the myth of the eternal feminine, in order to understand how woman has become the other [*l'Autre*] in relation to man (SS, p. 29).

In Beauvoir's view, otherness or alterity [*altérité*] is not specific to the relation between the sexes, but is a general structural characteristic of all relations between human beings, and "as primordial as consciousness itself [*la conscience elle-même*]" (SS, p. 16). Though alterity expresses itself concretely in human relations, it is not dependent on any empirical fact, but is a "fundamental category of human thought" (SS, p. 17). In order to clarify philosophically how alterity is a primordial human category, Beauvoir turns to G.W.F. Hegel. She takes as her starting point the passage in *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which Hegel traces the movement of spirit through a struggle for recognition between two self-conscious beings. This passage is part of a more general discussion of natural and spiritual being, according to which spirit develops from consciousness of the external world to self-consciousness, where it becomes an object for itself (Hegel [1807] 1977, pp. 111–119; cf. Hutchings 2003; Werner 2007).

Beauvoir's interpretation of the becoming of self-consciousness or spirit in the struggle for recognition is one of the first feminist interpretations of Hegel (Lundgren-Gothlin [1991] 1996; Hutchings 2003; cf. Bauer 2001). Her interpretation enables her to conceptualise not only the alterity between human consciousnesses, but also the lack of recognition, and even struggle, between men and women. More specifically, Beauvoir finds in Hegel's discussion the idea of a fundamental hostility in self-conscious beings towards every other self-conscious being, according to which "the subject can be posed only in being opposed—he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object" (SS, p. 17). The process is reciprocal, however, since the other consciousness or ego "sets up a reciprocal claim" (SS, p. 17). What intrigues Beauvoir when considering the relation between the sexes through this dialectic struggle is that in the case of the

¹² Though Beauvoir did not write systematic phenomenology, she was familiar with its method and central concepts; the French discussions on subjectivity in which she took part concern a level of existence opened up by the shift of attitude suggested by the initial moment of the Husserlian phenomenological reduction, the *epoché*. For detailed explications of the reduction, see Husserl ([1913] 1931, especially pp. 56–62; 131–143) and, e.g., Spiegelberg (1982, pp. 675–719) and Bernet et al. ([1989] 1993, pp. 58–87).

sexes, woman does not view herself as the essential, but often accepts—and even enjoys—her position as inessential, and in this sense other, in relation to man.

In order to understand this enjoyment of passivity, one needs to recall Beauvoir's ethics, according to which there is a general, inherent anguish in the face of one's own freedom or potential, which motivates and explains different attitudes of "failure" in the realisation of existence (cf. EA, p. 34). From the perspective of sexual difference, moreover, one must also consider the specific feminine possibilities (and impossibilities) of realising existence, and how the feminine condition makes woman inclined to seek recognition through the immanence of her person or through the transcendence of another person, rather than through her own acts and their objective products or ideas (cf. SS, p. 642).¹³ Only then is it possible to understand why in science, history, myths and—not least—in the lived experience of individual women, the meaning of 'femininity', 'woman' and everything associated with these concepts seems constantly to be defined in relation to 'man' and masculine existence in a non-reciprocal way (cf. SS, pp. 15–16).

Even women who have the ambition of realising existence objectively and creatively, Beauvoir claims, have to struggle against the tendency and habit to rely on immanence rather than on their own transcendence. They are too busily preoccupied with their immanence, and lack the kind of self-forgetfulness necessary for true creativity (SS, p. 711, cf. p. 715). In order to forget oneself, however, one must first have had the chance to find oneself, she admits. One possible interpretation of this reasoning is that the self-forgetfulness Beauvoir has in mind depends on one's having first "become subjective" in the Kierkegaardian sense: in order to realise herself objectively or intersubjectively, woman must have had a chance to experience the "inner transformation" or "actualization of inwardness" characteristic of existence (CUP, pp. 50–51, 68).

Whereas becoming in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is primarily discussed with reference to the freedom of the singular individual—even if this freedom is impossible without intersubjective recognition—becoming in *The Second Sex* has a concrete historical resonance that is lacking in the earlier essays. Beauvoir's use of the concept of becoming in order to understand what women have historically become does not mean that her study is sociopsychological or historical in any factual sense. As Sara Heinämaa (2003) argues, such an interpretation of *The Second Sex* conflicts with Beauvoir's radical statements about our way of being. These statements testify to the phenomenological understanding of the subject as a unity of body and consciousness that expresses itself in the mode of a style, rather than a substance with fixed attributes or traits of character. Human existence, in this

¹³ The echo of Hegel's understanding of the constitution of subjective and objective spirit in the central arguments of *The Second Sex* is somewhat surprising, considering that Beauvoir distances herself from Hegelian philosophy in both *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. The influence might, however, be explained by Beauvoir's awakening interest in history in the 1940s, and by the general French reception of Hegelian philosophy. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* was translated into French in 1939, and introduced by, among others, Alexandre Kojève. According to Herbert Spiegelberg (1982), both Kojève's Husserlian misinterpretations of Hegel's philosophy and method, and the "need of the time" for concreteness and structure, account for the French combining the two phenomenologies (Spiegelberg 1982, pp. 440–442). For a detailed discussion of the French interpretations of Hegel, and of Beauvoir's own interpretation of Kojève's reading, see Eva Lundgren-Gothlin ([1991] 1996, pp. 56–82).

perspective, means an essentially open and changing mode of being. The dynamic dimension of femininity and masculinity, moreover, means that women are not historical *beings*, that is, entities, but “two different ways of relating to entities” (Heinämaa 2003, p. 84).

Even in the chapter entitled “History” [*Histoire*] in the first part of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir’s primary aim is not to describe a history of women and men as individuals or beings in the world, but to view the data of historical research “in the light of existential philosophy” and, more specifically, in the light of the paradox of the feminine condition (cf. SS, p. 93, translation modified). As embodied modes or styles of relating to the world, however, femininity and masculinity are historical in the sense that they belong to traditions. In the introduction to the first part, Beauvoir remarks that she uses the verb ‘to be’ [*être*] not as a static value, but in “the dynamic Hegelian sense of ‘to have become’ [*être devenu*]” (SS, p. 24).

In my reading, this Hegelian reference echoes Beauvoir’s phenomenological and existential understanding of embodied being as historical, and even “pre-historical”. The temporality of subjectivity is one of the themes that Beauvoir explicitly mentions in her review of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945. Beauvoir agrees with Merleau-Ponty when she holds that time explains not only the opacity of the world, but also that of the self: as subjective, the individual is not an impersonal and timeless consciousness, but concrete and historical (Beauvoir [1945] 2004, p. 163). Beauvoir’s study of sexual difference is an original elaboration of this view of subjectivity, as her use of the concepts ‘feminine’ and ‘woman’ makes evident. These terms are historical in the sense that they should be understood with reference to “the present state of education and custom”, and refer to a level of pre-personal meaning, or a “common basis from which every singular feminine existence arises” (SS, p. 31, translation modified). It is with regard to the potentiality of this *common* feminine basis or situation for the actual subjective becoming of “singular feminine existences”—the beings we take as women—that Beauvoir undertakes her investigation of real and symbolic or imaginary femininity in the first part of *The Second Sex*.¹⁴

2 Real and imaginary femininity

The ethical arguments raised in *The Second Sex* concerning the becoming of individual feminine existences rest on Beauvoir’s description of individual and intersubjective freedom in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. What complicates woman’s situation—in comparison, for instance, to the situation of the slave in Hegel’s discussion—is that the bond that unites woman to her “master” is fundamentally emotional, and founded in affectivity and instinctual needs (SS, pp. 19–21). Considered from the perspective of affectivity, becoming

¹⁴ Beauvoir’s use of these concepts should be distinguished from the specific meaning Jacques Lacan later gives to the real, the symbolic and the imaginary in his psychoanalytical theory. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Beauvoir stresses the importance of Lacan’s theory of identity formation in her discussion of feminine experiences in childhood (SS, p. 296). For Lacan too, the imaginary is crucial for the development and structure of sexual identity and difference (see, e.g., Lacan [1949] 2002, pp. 3–9).

subjective is a process that involves the whole of existence, and it begins already in the individual's anonymous and affective dependence on others. This existential condition motivates Beauvoir to study the total situation of the embodied being of the sexes. The phenomenological perspective is crucial here, since both subjectivity and intersubjectivity, in this view, are ultimately founded in sense-experience.¹⁵

Beauvoir's studies of biology, psychoanalysis and historical materialism in *The Second Sex* lead her to conclude that none of these theoretical frameworks, taken by themselves, can explain how the hierarchy between the sexes has been established. Rather, the facts provided by the sciences need to be understood from the perspective of the individual's total existential situation (cf. SS, pp. 69, 83, 91, 93). For Beauvoir, this implies studying the meaning of sexual difference objectively both from the perspectives of science, history and what she considers an androcentric imaginary, and from the perspective of women's lived experience [*l'expérience vécue*]. Beauvoir explains the correlation between these perspectives:

Underlying each individual drama, as it forms the basis of the economic history of mankind, there is an existential foundation that alone enables us to understand in its unity that singular form which a life is (SS, p. 91, translation modified).

She also insists that the theoretical understandings of the "facts" of the sexes and their relations, provided by the sciences of biology, psychology and the history of economics, must be understood from the point of view of how these facts are singularised and concretely lived by particular individuals (cf. SS, p. 91).

Beauvoir's subsequent study of the historical changes of the feminine condition shows that it is neither an independent, nor a continuous process, but follows the stages of progress and destruction of human culture and civilisation as a whole. What is constant in these movements of history, however, is that women are, for the most part, in a state of subjection (SS, pp. 128, 169). Again, this subjection is at once material and imaginary: because of the privileged place traditionally held by men in economic life, and the related prestige and value of masculinity, women tend to subordinate themselves to the real and imaginary needs and interests of men (cf. SS, p. 169). For this reason, Beauvoir sets forth to study what one could call an androcentric imaginary: woman "such as men have defined her" [*telle que l'homme la définit*] (SS, p. 169).¹⁶ This imaginary, or woman's "being-for-men" [*être-pour-les-hommes*], is considered one of the essential factors in woman's real-world situation (SS, p. 169). Beauvoir summarises the androcentric imaginary in the concept and myth of 'the eternal feminine' [*l'Éternel Féminin*] (SS, pp. 282–292).

¹⁵ The references to phenomenology in *The Second Sex* are not unambiguous, but are explicit and convincing, appearing throughout Beauvoir's analysis of the feminine condition (see, e.g., SS, pp. 66, 69, 682, 725).

¹⁶ What I here call an 'androcentric imaginary' functions in a similar way to what Michèle Le Dœuff ([1980] 1989) has labelled 'the philosophical imaginary', in that it creates that which it subordinates, represses or excludes. In the borderland between rhetoric, philosophy and psychoanalysis, the philosophical imaginary refers simultaneously to the explicit figurative language of philosophical discourse, to its imaginary world and to a textual unconscious. According to Le Dœuff, there is not only an imaginary region within philosophy, but philosophy inscribes itself as a discipline by distinguishing itself from fields like the mythical, poetical, and metaphorical (Le Dœuff [1980] 1989, pp. 114–115).

The myth of the eternal feminine initially seems contradictory and so overdetermined that it could imply almost anything:

Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena—woman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress; she is man’s prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison d’être*. (SS, p. 175, italics in original)

But the ambiguity and flexibility of the myth is precisely its (open) secret. One of the crucial definitions of a myth [*mythos*] in early Greek understanding is that it is something said, that is, a word or a speech [*logos*], without the distinction of truth and falsity (Liddell and Scott 1968, p. 1151). As a rumour, the “talk of men”, a tale or a story that never comes to an end, a myth cannot be categorised as either true or false. This conception illuminates Beauvoir’s characterisation of the myth of the eternal feminine. Living a life beyond truth and falsity, the myth “haunts the consciousnesses without ever appearing before them as a fixed object” (SS, p. 175, translation modified).

Instability and overdetermination also belong to the definition of ‘the truly feminine’ according to the content of the myth: the ideal ‘woman’ is the incarnation of man’s impossible dream of at once possessing being and recognising himself as a free and self-determining consciousness. Metaphorically, woman incarnates the dream of “quiet in disquiet” and “an opaque plenitude that nevertheless would be endowed with consciousness” (SS, p. 172). As such, Beauvoir concludes, woman is for man the wished-for “intermediary” [*l’intermédiaire*] between nature, which remains strange and foreign to him, and his equal, who is too identical with him (SS, p. 172). In woman, as the intermediary between nature and existence, man hopes to attain being by carnally making another being his own, while at the same time confirming his sense of freedom through the submission of another self-consciousness (cf. SS, p. 173).

One of Beauvoir’s main conclusions in her extensive study of how femininity is constituted objectively and subjectively, that is, in the common cultural world and in women’s lived experiences, is that the meaning of feminine independence is an intersubjective matter. This means that human freedom requires the concrete recognition of one’s fundamental dependence on others. My individual existence is realised when I actively take up the possibilities created by others, through their actions, and when they also recognise my projects by their free engagement.

The specific paradox of the feminine condition that Beauvoir explicates throughout *The Second Sex*, however, implies that women do not view themselves as fully *intersubjective* beings. First of all, having traditionally been denied the opportunity to take an active part in the public creation of values, women do not identify themselves with ‘humanity’, and—therefore—do not consider themselves responsible for the world and its future in the way individual men do (cf. SS, pp. 611, 614, 618–619, 622). But neither do women, in general, assume a subjective attitude by identifying with each other. As Beauvoir writes in the introduction to the first book, women do not authentically say “we”, which would imply a common

past or solidarity of work and interest (SS, p. 19). This is explained by the unity that the couple constitutes for women: through love and desire, but also economic and material dependency, women are attached to certain men more firmly than to other women; to fathers, husbands and other men of their own class (SS, p. 19).¹⁷ To realise one's individual existence, Beauvoir seems to suggest, would not only allow for, but also require, a plurality of intersubjective identifications and relations, individually and collectively.

In comparison to Beauvoir's more systematic study of feminine becoming in *The Second Sex*, the story of Françoise's becoming in *She Came to Stay* is an original literary description of how the metaphysical discovery of individuality—which Beauvoir finds necessary for authentic subjective transcendence—can only come about through concrete encounters with others. The primary context of Françoise's subjective becoming is her relation with the two other main characters in the novel: Pierre and Xavière. In his early analysis of Beauvoir's novel, Merleau-Ponty draws attention to the fact that Françoise experiences her concrete individuality for the first time through the painful experience of the other, initially represented by Xavière (Merleau-Ponty [1948] 1964, pp. 32–33). The frame of this dramatic experience, however, presupposes a situation of several others and their ambiguous relations: Françoise's subjective becoming is conditioned by 'the couple', but also by 'the trio', as different forms of intersubjectivity (cf. Merleau-Ponty [1948] 1964, p. 35).

As I now turn to *She Came to Stay*, I will draw attention to another aspect of Françoise's becoming, which concerns her failure to become authentically subjective, and must be understood in the light of sexual difference. As mentioned, Beauvoir ends her study of feminine becoming in *The Second Sex* by discussing various feminine modes of justifying one's existence: 'the narcissist', 'the woman in love', 'the mystic' and 'the independent woman'. While all four attitudes are conditioned by the traditional destiny of woman, according to which woman is identified with passivity and immanence more than activity and transcendence, Beauvoir views the attitude of the independent woman as a potential authentic feminine subjectivity, the actualisation of which is dependent on her living in a plurality of intersubjective relations.¹⁸

In order to see the operative-thematic relation between the novel and *The Second Sex*, one needs to be familiar with the frame of Françoise's becoming shown in the metaphysical drama between Françoise, Pierre and Xavière.

¹⁷ Beauvoir introduces the Heideggerian concept *Mitsein* in order to describe the primordial unity and significance of the couple for woman's otherness. Through the couple, woman is other in a totality founded on a biological necessity: procreation (SS, p. 19). From the viewpoint of biology, the man-woman unity is considered a fundamental mode of intersubjective existence, and a crucial element in a collectivity (SS, pp. 68–69). For specific analyses of the Heideggerian elements of Beauvoir's thought, see Gothlin (2003) and Bauer (2006).

¹⁸ Beauvoir is indefinite concerning the extent to which feminine authentic subjectivity would resemble masculine subjectivity as we know it; while the emancipated woman will need to attain man's situation, she claims, it is impossible to know in advance whether her "ideational worlds" would remain different (SS, p. 724).

3 Françoise's becoming in *She Came to Stay*

She Came to Stay is the story of Françoise, a seemingly independent woman in her 30s, living in Paris, and of the so-called trio: the intimate triangle between Françoise, Pierre, a successful director and actor, also in his 30s, and the 10-year-younger Xavière, who enters Françoise's and Pierre's common life in the first chapter of the novel and is finally murdered by Françoise by the end of the novel. The central events of *She Came to Stay* are Pierre's infatuation with Xavière; Françoise's falling ill because of this affair; the forming of the trio after Françoise's recovery; the break up of the trio, caused by Xavière's relationship with a young man, Gerbert; Françoise's deception of Xavière, by spending a night with Gerbert; and finally Françoise's expiation of her guilt by killing Xavière.

The psychological motive for the murder is Françoise's betrayal of Xavière, as Beauvoir ([1960] 1962) also explains in a later autobiographical reflection on the novel: "I introduced Gerbert; tempted by his youth and charm, Françoise renounced them. Later, when she had won Xavière's love, she fell into his arms, and it was this betrayal that she expunged by murder" (PL, p. 407, translation modified). The metaphysical motives behind the murder, however, begin already when Françoise realises that Xavière is not a being that she can dominate or even possess, but a separate existence who has a will and desires of her own. Xavière's initial reluctance to come and live in Paris, for instance, is an unpleasant surprise to Françoise: "Why had she refused to take the offer seriously? Françoise was irritated to feel this small, hostile, stubborn mind beside her" (SCS, p. 34).

She Came to Stay is Françoise's story in two senses. First, the development of the intrigue is primarily viewed from her perspective: the story is told from Françoise's viewpoint in almost all chapters. The two other points of view are represented by Elisabeth, Pierre's sister, an unsuccessful artist who is involved with a married man, and Gerbert, an actor of the same age as Xavière. The reason for making Elisabeth the focal point in two of the chapters, Beauvoir explains, is to make visible the ambiguity of human emotions, depending on the perspective from which they are viewed; in comparison with Françoise's first-person experience of the trio, Elisabeth's third-person perspective "reduced the adventures of the trio to those derisory properties which human passion normally attains in the eyes of a third party" (PL, p. 411). Gerbert's perspective, Beauvoir further explains, is meant to balance Elisabeth's: "In order to offset Elisabeth's view of the trio by a more charitable opinion, which still came from an outsider, I let Gerbert take over the narrative for one chapter" (PL, p. 412). However different they may be otherwise, Françoise, Elisabeth and Gerbert are unified by the inner monologue in which they reflect on their own and others' appearance, motives, feelings and actions.¹⁹

¹⁹ The two main characters that lack a narrative voice are Xavière and Pierre. Their silence reinforces the impression that neither of them is particularly interested in the world about them. While Xavière's being is sheer immanence, Pierre gives himself over unreservedly to his desire, the objects of which are either his own plays or women. In its particular solipsism, the attitude of Pierre resembles that of the adventurer in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, who "throws himself into his undertakings"—exploration, conquest, war, speculation, love, politics—but never attaches himself to the ends of these undertakings, only to his own conquest (EA, p. 58).

The story is also Françoise's in the second sense that the "metaphysical drama" of *She Came to Stay* can be considered her passage from the solipsist experience of being the one unique subject among things and other human beings, whom she experiences as objects in her world, to experiencing herself as merely one among all others, and finally back again to a different, yet self-deceptive or inauthentic, experience of being one with herself.

The original solipsism of Françoise means, concretely, that she experiences others as belonging to her and even that things do not exist unless perceived by her: only her life is real, as Beauvoir has her say (SCS, p. 13). Françoise is aware of this attitude of hers, as in the following inner monologue at the beginning of the novel, when alone in the empty theatre, a place where she and Gerbert work together late at night:

She went out of the office. Not that she had any particular desire for whisky, but the dark corridors attracted her. When she was not there, the smell of dust, the half-light, the forlorn solitude, all this did not exist for anyone; it did not exist at all. Now that she was there, the red of the carpet gleamed through the darkness like a timid night-light. She exercised this power: her presence revived things from their inanimateness; she gave them their color, their smell. (SCS, p. 12)

In a conversation with Gerbert a little while later, Françoise expresses how she generally experiences other people:

"It's almost impossible to believe that other people are conscious beings, aware of their own inward feelings, as we ourselves are aware of ours," said Françoise. "To me, it's terrifying, especially when you begin to feel that you're nothing more than a figment of someone else's mind. But that hardly ever happens, and never completely." (SCS, p. 16)

In particular, Xavière 'belongs' to Françoise in her solipsist world, as illustrated in a passage describing a situation in a dance café, to which Françoise has invited Xavière. Françoise observes Xavière, who is absorbed by a dancer and does not notice:

Xavière's gestures, her face, her very life depended on Françoise for their existence. For herself, at that moment, Xavière was no more than a flavor of coffee, a throbbing music, a dance, a vague sense of well-being; but for Françoise, Xavière's childhood, her days of stagnation, her distastes were a romantic story as real as the delicate contour of her cheeks. And it was right here in this café, among the varicolored hangings, that the story ended, this precise moment in Françoise's life when she turned to look at Xavière and study her. (SCS, p. 20)

The price for this solipsism, however, is that Françoise's individuality is not clearly defined (cf. PL, p. 408). Beauvoir views Françoise's discovery of this lack of a real, individual self as the first of two subjective transformations: "from a position of absolute and all-embracing authority she was suddenly reduced to an infinitely tiny particle in the external universe" (PL, p. 408).

Françoise's second transformation is not only the experience that she exists as a singular individual among all others, but that others can "invade her personality and bewitch it" (PL, p. 408). Having recovered from the illness by which she tried to retain her original and sovereign solitude, according to the metaphysical interpretation, and finally accepted the trio, the roles are now changed. It is now Françoise who is 'possessed' by Xavière (cf. SCS, pp. 238–239).

[...] Françoise felt painfully at the mercy of that passionate, touchy soul. She seemed to exist only through Xavière's capricious feelings for her. It was as if a voodoo sorceress had taken possession of her through the medium of a waxen image and was subjecting her to the most horrible tortures. At that moment, Françoise was an untouchable, a wasted and shriveled up soul. She had to wait for a smile from Xavière before she could hope to regain some self-respect. [...] it was true agony to feel that her happiness and even her intrinsic being was dependent to such an extent on this strange, rebellious spirit. (SCS, pp. 238–239)

In the end, Françoise's self-image becomes unbearable to herself, and she finds herself faced with two alternatives: "a lifetime of self-disgust, or to shatter the spell by destroying her who cast it" (PL, p. 409). By choosing to kill Xavière, it seems that Françoise can only retain her former self by annihilating what she experiences as the inaccessible presence of the other (cf. SCS, pp. 403–404).

The drama in which Françoise, Pierre and Xavière take part has been read in a Hegelian manner, and as an illustration of the struggle for recognition between two self-consciousnesses. This interpretation is partly influenced by the novel's initial epigraph, which is a reference to *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "Each consciousness [*conscience*] seeks the death of the other" (SCS, p. 7, translation modified). But as Beauvoir remarks, she had conceived of the general problem of her novel before she had actually read Hegel.²⁰

Merleau-Ponty's article "The Novel and Metaphysics" ([1948] 1964) gives an alternative, phenomenological and existential interpretation, where the emphasis is on the ambiguity of all human relations and actions.²¹ A literature of existence will necessarily be amoral, Merleau-Ponty claims, which is not the same as immoral, since there is no longer any human nature or essence to rely on (Merleau-Ponty [1948] 1964, p. 28). From this perspective, *She Came to Stay* illustrates the impossibility of knowing in advance whether our actions will be morally justifiable or not (Merleau-Ponty [1948] 1964, p. 4). This is because the novel describes human existence between two temporal limits: on the one hand the immediate (Xavière), which is "closed tightly upon itself", beyond language and commitment, and on the

²⁰ In *Prime of Life*, Beauvoir comments on the connections between the themes of the other and death, explaining that the consciousness of the other, when she came to realise it in actuality, was "as shocking and unacceptable a fact as death" (PL, p. 381). In *She Came to Stay* the two themes are combined: once Xavière is deprived of life, she loses all power over the world and over Françoise (PL, p. 381; cf. SCS pp. 386, 402, 404).

²¹ "The Novel and Metaphysics" (Le roman et la métaphysique) was originally published in 1945 in *Les Temps Modernes*, and edited in a collection of essays entitled *Sens et non-sens* in 1948. All references here are to the English translation of *Sens et non-sens*.

other hand the infinite, characterised by “absolute confidence in language and rational decision” (Françoise), and a position that becomes empty in its attempt to completely transcend itself (cf. Merleau-Ponty [1948] 1964, p. 39).²²

The ambiguity of existence is also a central theme in Beauvoir’s autobiographical discussion of *She Came to Stay*. In the most successful parts of the novel she recognises an “ambiguity of significations corresponding to the ambiguity one meets in reality” (PL, p. 415, translation modified). Her goal to describe events as “simultaneously comprehensible and contingent” is thereby fulfilled (PL, p. 415).

In line with the phenomenological and existential stress on ambiguity, I argue that the very core of the novel—the motivation for Françoise to “annihilate” the presence of Xavière—is ambiguous in a way that calls for an interpretation of *She Came to Stay* from the perspective of sexual difference. Erotic love is a central theme throughout the novel, and is already present in the first chapter; furthermore, Françoise’s desire for Gerbert in the theatre is confirmed in a dialogue between them in a later chapter. Love even seems to motivate Françoise’s murder of Xavière. When retrospectively discussing the ending of *She Came to Stay*, Beauvoir is very clear on the point that Xavière’s egotism or self-love was not sufficient for the “obsessive proportions” of Françoise’s hatred: “[c]hildish and capricious as she [Xavière] was, she could never pierce Françoise’s inner defenses and turn her into a monster” (PL, p. 409). Only one character possessed this strength, Beauvoir concludes, and that was Pierre. Françoise’s attitude to Xavière, in other words, depends not only on the trio Françoise–Xavière–Gerbert, but also on her bond to Pierre.²³

One of the places in which Beauvoir has Françoise describe her relation to Pierre is through an inner monologue, in which she engages while watching him performing on stage:

It’s true that we are really one, she thought with a burst of love. It was Pierre who was speaking and his hand that was raised. Yet his gestures, his tones, were as much a part of Françoise’s life as they were of his. Or rather, there was but one life between them and at its core one entity, which could be termed neither he nor she, but they. (SCS, p. 51, italics in original)

This description is not only representative of the way in which Françoise views herself in relation to Pierre early in the novel, but also resonates in Beauvoir’s more

²² In the frame of Merleau-Ponty’s article, *She Came to Stay* is considered an example of metaphysical literature, and as sharing the aim of phenomenological and existential philosophy to formulate “an experience of the world, a contact with the world, which precedes all thought *about* the world” (Merleau-Ponty [1948] 1964, p. 28). Cf. Fullbrook and Fullbrook (1998), who provide an early analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s article in dialogue with Beauvoir’s 1946 essay on metaphysics and literature (Beauvoir [1946] 2004).

²³ Toril Moi (1994) offers an alternative interpretation of the triangular relations in *She Came to Stay* when reading Françoise’s crime as the murder of a fantasmatic mother figure (Moi 1994, p. 118). Underlying the seeming Oedipal father-mother-daughter structure between Pierre-Françoise-Xavière, Moi claims, is another configuration: from the metaphors used in the descriptions of Xavière from Françoise’s perspective, she finds it hard not to conclude that “the timeless, suffocating monster that leaves no space in the world for Françoise is the very image of the omnipotent and malevolent archaic mother threatening to devour her daughter” (Moi 1994, p. 118).

schematic description of the attitude of ‘the woman in love’ in *The Second Sex*. As Beauvoir writes, the woman in love is one expression of the attempt to achieve existential “salvation” [*salut*] in solitude (SS, p. 639).²⁴

The religious connotation here is not accidental. The modes of solitary justification presented near the end of *The Second Sex* describe three interrelated attitudes of devotion: the devotion to the image of one’s own person (the narcissist), to a particular man (the woman in love) and to a male God (the mystic). In order to understand the attitude of ‘the woman in love’, it is helpful to contrast it with Beauvoir’s description of feminine narcissism, on the one hand, and the love of the independent woman, on the other. Whereas Beauvoir conceptualises ‘the narcissist’ and ‘the woman in love’ as inauthentic modes of feminine justification, the independent woman—whose becoming can only be imagined—is her prime example of authentic feminine existence.

4 Love and independence

The significance of fantasy and a shared imaginary for feminine identity already suggests that Beauvoir’s way of conceptualising sexual difference in *The Second Sex* cannot be adequately understood without reference to psychoanalysis. As noted above, Beauvoir’s attitude towards psychoanalysis is ambivalent. In addition to her general scepticism towards the determinist and yet ambiguous meaning of sexuality within psychoanalysis as a science, which she shares with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, she finds Freud’s theory of feminine sexuality and eroticism defective (see, e.g., SS, pp. 70, 300–307). Beauvoir also reinterprets and supplements Freud’s descriptions of early childhood from the perspective of existential phenomenology and femininity.²⁵ What is more interesting for my purposes here, however, is Beauvoir’s existential reinterpretation of the concept of narcissism, appearing at the end of the second part of *The Second Sex*.

Beauvoir generally understands narcissism as a “process of alienation”: the ego is posited as an absolute end, in which the subject takes refuge (SS, p. 641, translation modified). It is important to distinguish Beauvoir’s *existential* use of the concept of narcissism, which accounts for the ‘logic’ behind the feminine attitudes that she describes in *The Second Sex*, from narcissism as a clinical concept. While

²⁴ In light of the tradition of existential thought, it is important to distinguish solitude [*solitude*] from singularity [*singularité*]. Whereas singularity is an existential condition that does not depend on being or not being with others, the meaning of solitude is close to the isolation of Kierkegaard’s subjective thinker, who cannot express the truth of existence in direct or objective terms. In Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Françoise’s illness in *She Came to Stay*, solitude has an even stronger meaning, indicating the finitude of human existence: at the hospital, Françoise has withdrawn from the human temporal world into “the natural world where she finds a frozen peace” (Merleau-Ponty [1948] 1964, p. 34).

²⁵ Beauvoir’s celebrated phrase on feminine becoming, for instance—“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”—appears in the opening to the chapter on childhood [*enfance*], and introduces her reinterpretation of the Oedipal drama (SS, p. 295). This does not suggest that the becoming Beauvoir has in mind is psychological, but that subjectivity is founded in, and must be understood with reference to, experiences of affectivity and desire, and that these experiences are sexually differentiated. For studies of Beauvoir’s description of feminine desire in *The Second Sex*, see Heinämaa (2003, 2006).

Beauvoir seems to hold that women are more vulnerable to pathological forms of narcissism, she is also sensitive to the general existential conditioning of the lives of individual women. This conditioning is not merely psychological, but the result of scientific, historical, mythological and experiential constitution.

While Beauvoir acknowledges that many attitudes are met with in woman, she seems to agree with Freud in claiming that *the situation* of woman conditions her more than man “to turn towards herself and devote her love to herself” (SS, p. 641).²⁶ The body is crucial in this situation:

Ineffective, isolated, woman can neither find her place nor take her own measure; she gives herself supreme importance because no object of importance is accessible to her. If she can thus offer *herself* to her own desires, it is because she has felt herself to be an object since childhood. Her education has prompted her to identify herself with her whole body, puberty has revealed this body as passive and desirable; it is something she can touch, like satin or velvet, and can contemplate with a lover’s eye. (SS, pp. 641–642, translation modified)

It is also due to woman’s total situation, in Beauvoir’s view, that the image of one’s own body has a particular meaning in feminine identity as compared to masculine identity, in the sense that it is more often identified with the passive sides of subjectivity: whereas male beauty indicates transcendence, female beauty expresses “the passivity of immanence” (SS, pp. 642–643). While man, in other words, does not see himself in his fixed image, since his body generally does not seem to him an object of desire, woman believes she sees herself in her own mirror image. Furthermore, and again because of the restraints of her situation, this image becomes attractive to herself:

A passive and given fact, the reflection is, like herself, a thing; and as she does covet female flesh, her flesh, she gives life through her admiration and desire to the imaged qualities she sees. (SS, p. 643)

The consequences for subjective becoming of the narcissist woman is that the world and other people will not genuinely interest her; infatuated with her own ego, she “loses all hold on the concrete world, she has no concern to establish any real relation with others” (SS, p. 650, translation modified).

The attitudes of the narcissist and the woman in love can be articulated in terms of two reverse paradoxes. The paradox of the narcissist, according to Beauvoir,

²⁶ In his classical definition, Freud’s understands narcissism as a kind of concrete self-love characterised by sexual pleasure (Freud [1914] 1957, p. 73). He then goes on to distinguish a primary and normal narcissism from various secondary, pathological, forms. What is particularly interesting from the perspective of Beauvoir’s existential description of feminine types is that Freud developed his concept of narcissism partly by studying “the erotic life of the sexes” (Freud [1914] 1957, pp. 82, 87–90). In brief, he distinguishes between an ‘anaclitic’ or ‘attachment’ type, whose choice of love-object is based on the attachment to the person who first fed, cared for and protected him or her, and a ‘narcissist type’, who has taken as the model for the object-choice his or her own self. While these types do not divide human beings into two sharply differentiated groups, Freud claims on the basis of clinical observations that “complete object-love of the attachment type” is more often characteristic of the male, and object-love of the narcissist type is more common in the female (Freud [1914] 1957, p. 88).

is that “she claims to be given values by a world that she must consider valueless”, since she is the only one that counts in this world (SS, p. 652). The paradox of the woman in love, on the contrary, is that becoming subjective, for her, means abandoning her whole subjectivity to another: the woman in love “abandons herself to love first of all to *save herself*; but the paradox of idolatrous love is that in trying to save herself she *denies herself* utterly in the end” (SS, p. 660). This denial of self is not masochism, where there is also enjoyment of one’s own humiliation, but rather a dream of “ecstatic union” (SS, p. 660).²⁷ In this union, the woman in love transcends the limitations of her self, and reaches infinity through a subjectivity superior to her own.²⁸

In contrast to the schematic description in *The Second Sex*, where the attitudes or types of the narcissist and the woman in love are rather clearly distinguished from one another, and described in static terms, the characters in *She Came to Stay* incarnate these attitudes in a changing and ambiguous plurality of human relations. The couple in its different variations is constitutive of this plurality, but so is the trio. By describing the alternative unity of the trio, Beauvoir not only questions the naturalness of the couple, as Merleau-Ponty remarks, but also investigates the conditions and limitations of the couple, and its significance for individual becoming (cf. Merleau-Ponty [1948] 1964, p. 35).

In addition, the women characters in *She Came to Stay* express narcissism in degrees, or move between the attitude of the narcissist and other existential attitudes.²⁹ Thus no attitude can be found in one character only, and several characters express different attitudes at the same time. While the attitude of the narcissist woman, for instance, is manifested in its extreme form in the character of Xavière, who represents a narcissist “limit case”, Elisabeth explicitly expresses one crucial aspect of this attitude: the experienced irreality of the external world (cf. SCS, p. 215). Françoise’s style of life represents the opposite of this attitude, in Beauvoir’s own interpretation, and is thus the counterpoint in the novel to the character of Elisabeth (cf. PL, pp. 411–412).³⁰

Considering the central place of the body and of the image in Beauvoir’s description of female narcissism, Françoise’s attitude is the least narcissist in *She Came to Stay*. For one thing, she is hardly present in her body at all, and when she catches a glimpse of her face in the mirror she is surprised, since normally her face does not exist for her (see, e.g., SCS, p. 40, cf. Merleau-Ponty [1948] 1964, p. 29). What is most important to Françoise as a writer, moreover, is *creating* beauty, rather

²⁷ For a detailed description of feminine masochism, see SS (pp. 418–421). Cf. Sartre’s description of masochism as one expression of the self’s attitude to its ontological “object-state” in the presence of the other (Sartre [1943] 1984, pp. 491–493).

²⁸ This attitude is also present in the mystic’s love of the (imaginary) person of “God Himself [*Dieu même*]”, rather than the real or imaginary person of a particular human man (cf. SS, pp. 679–687).

²⁹ In this sense, the relation between the two descriptions in *The Second Sex* and in *She Came to Stay* resembles the relation between Beauvoir’s description of inauthentic attitudes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and their concrete modes of appearing. Although it is possible to distinguish them abstractly, concretely they blend with one another. Cf. EA (pp. 34, 42–78).

³⁰ In most of her novels, Beauvoir explains, there is a foil to the main heroine; in the case of Françoise and Elisabeth, the latter stands as a “disturbing challenge” [*inquiétante contestation*] to the former (PL, p. 412). Françoise, furthermore, balances the asymmetrical relation between Xavière and Pierre (PL, p. 413).

than *incarnating* beauty. This is, at least, the conviction on which she and Pierre have founded their life together: “It was Pierre who had convinced her that the greatest thing in the world was the creation of beauty. Their whole life together had been built on this belief” (SCS, p. 55).

In her love for Pierre, and the sense of self and reality he inspires in her throughout the novel, Françoise’s attitude in fact has more in common with the attitude of the woman in love in *The Second Sex* than with the narcissist. For the woman in love, as Beauvoir writes, to love means to lose oneself, “body and soul” [*corps et âme*], in a particular man, representing the absolute, the essential (SS, p. 653). Because she is integrated with her lover’s existence, the woman in love feels herself necessary, and therefore justified (SS, p. 660).

Yet in contrast with the attitude of the loving woman, Françoise’s crime at the end of *She Came to Stay* might appear as an individual, and thus more subjective, mode of justifying her own existence, since not even Pierre will ever know of her action:

Alone. She had acted alone. As alone as in death. One day Pierre would know. But even he would only know her act from the outside. No one could condemn or absolve her. Her act was her very own. *I have done it of my free will*. It was her own will which was being fulfilled, now nothing separated her from herself. She had chosen at last. She had chosen herself. (SCS, p. 404, italics in original)

If one considers Beauvoir’s development of the concept of becoming in *The Second Sex*, however, according to which feminine becoming is not merely the solitary becoming of singular individuals, but is also an intersubjective and historical transformation, Françoise’s becoming is still ‘solipsist’ rather than subjective. In order to become subjective, Françoise would have had to act in response to the changing intersubjective situation created by herself, Pierre, Xavière and Gerbert. This might not only have transformed her own self, but also her relations with others, including that with Xavière and Pierre. As the novel now ends, Françoise is still locked into an imaginary where love is inauthentic and therefore resists subjectivity as well as intersubjectivity. According to Beauvoir’s analysis of feminine becoming in *The Second Sex*, inauthentic love “destroys the possibility of friendship because the woman in love is shut off in her lover’s universe; jealousy increases her isolation and thereby narrows her dependence” (SS, p. 674, translation modified). Inauthentic love, however, is not only contrasted to self-love, but also to authentic love: what is hardly imaginable to the dependent women in *She Came to Stay* is conceptualised as a possibility for the independent woman in *The Second Sex*.

What primarily distinguishes the independent woman from the other attitudes in *The Second Sex* is her economic and social autonomy (cf. SS, p. 691). That the independent woman is emancipated through education and work, however, does not imply that her situation is ethically and psychologically equal or identical to man’s, as the cases of Françoise and Elisabeth again illustrate. Both are torn between their professional awareness of themselves as subjects, and the androcentric expectations of “feminine submission” in erotic situations. Since Beauvoir’s notion of independence in *The Second Sex* is an intersubjective becoming that concerns

feminine subjectivity in its totality, that is, its layers of affective and emotional passivity as well as its higher levels of concrete and spiritual activity, the emancipated woman cannot independently reshape the concept of femininity. Rather, her way of living the condition that she shares with all other feminine individuals constitutes a specific variation of the feminine paradox. At once emancipated and bound to a traditional androcentric imaginary, she experiences the division between immanence and transcendence, necessity and possibility, determination and freedom in its extremity.

In a traditional androcentric imaginary, self-love and love of the other correlate with one another; the attitudes of the narcissist woman and of the woman in love circulate between idealisation (of the self) and identification (with the other). Beauvoir distinguishes these two expressions of inauthentic love from authentic love [*amour authentique*], which she understands as the affirmation of difference, and as the acceptance of the contingency and limitations of the other (SS, p. 664).³¹ Authentic love is “an interhuman relation”, and an assumption of one’s finite human condition, rather than a mode of infinite salvation (SS, p. 664, translation modified). In *The Second Sex*, as well as in *She Came to Stay*, this love is already operative as the hope for a new (becoming) imaginary.

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³¹ Cf. Beauvoir’s description of happy [*heureux*] feminine eroticism in *The Second Sex* (pp. 421–423). See also Bergoffen (1996). For an interpretation of Beauvoir’s idea of ‘authentic love’ that differs slightly from the one I provide here, see Rosalyn Diprose (1998).

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