In her extensive work, *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir uses the language and framework of existentialist philosophy to examine the condition of woman in society as elucidated by biology, psychoanalysis, history, literature, and an examination of human growth and development and human relationships. Her goal in completing such a work is, quite simply, to answer the question “What is a woman?” (xxi). Many definitions have been given in answer to this question, all of which De Beauvoir examines in turn. For instance, she looks at what woman is in a biological sense, in a historical sense, in a political sense, in an economic capacity and many others. For De Beauvoir, however, it is immediately obvious in her introduction that the definition of woman with which she is most concerned is one that can be given in the language of existentialism, e.g. is woman “Subject/Self” or “Object/Other” or, to put it another way, is she the “essential” or the “inessential?” De Beauvoir clarifies what she means by these categories by citing the example of Hegel’s “Master-Slave Dialectic,” in which “we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; 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” (xxviii, italics mine). Woman, De Beauvoir argues, has long been relegated to such a position of the inessential or object by man, who has set himself up as “the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (xxii).

This position of Other is then the primary evil of woman’s situation. According to existentialist philosophy, “existence precedes essence” meaning that a person in possession of true consciousness is active in deciding the essence of whom he (or she!) is, thereby functioning as Subject or “being-for-
a shirt or a pair of scissors¹, whose essence and function has been decided before their existence. Woman becomes an object, then, when she acts in “bad faith” by allowing man to define her essence in existence rather than actively participating in existence in such a way as to create her essence, and, as an object, she is then deprived of what it means to be a fully-conscious, self-fulfilling human being and is forever condemned to a state of anxiety in bad faith. But how did woman come to be in such a predicament? By examining the biological condition of woman, the history of her treatment by society, and her present place in society, De Beauvoir unfolds some of the reasons for, and ways in which, woman has been confined to the position of Object in relationship to man as Subject.

Interestingly, however, biology gives no direct reason for woman’s historic position as the inessential or other, and De Beauvoir writes “Biology is not enough to give an answer to the question that is before us: why is woman the Other?” It does seem enough, however, to confirm De Beauvoir’s idea that the relationship established between man and woman is one in which the man is the active, penetrating, deciding agent and woman is relative to him passively and receptively. Also, as an Object existing in bad faith, according to existentialist philosophy, woman is somehow alienated from herself by letting another define her essence for her, and De Beauvoir uses biology to examine ways in which woman is further alienated from herself by biological conditions. For instance, during menstruation, woman “feels her body most painfully as an obscure, alien, thing; it is indeed, the prey of a stubborn and foreign life that each month constructs and then tears down a cradle within it . . . woman, like man, is her body; but her body is something other than herself” (29). Furthermore, biological conditions make it more difficult for a woman to act with the same vitality of action upon the world as man, which is a helpful in establishing one’s essence as Subject through action, and De Beauvoir writes, “her grasp on the world is thus more restricted; she has less firmness and less steadiness available for projects that in general she is less capable of carrying out” (34). Thus, while biology can give no definitive reason for woman’s “otherness,”

¹ See Steve Wilkins Chapter on Satre in Good Ideas From Questionable Christians and Outright Pagans.
De Beauvoir understands it to nevertheless underline woman's situation as such and to further emphasize the anxiety she experiences in this situation.

History, then, for De Beauvoir is one great record of woman's relegation to otherness with certain fluctuations in what degree she is forced to accept it, and even the various relationships by which she is defined in modern society further highlight her role as the "inessential." For instance, woman as 'Wife' is too often defined by the Subject of her husband, for whom she serves to "satisfy a male's sexual needs and to take care of his household" (427). Also, while society reveres woman for her necessary role as 'Mother,' if this role comes into contradiction with the active, deciding essence of the man it must be opposed by either contraceptives or, in the worst case, abortion. De Beauvoir describes the plight of woman encouraged to commit abortions by men eager for copulation but not reproduction, writing: "The drawbacks of her situation - menstruation, illnesses, and the like - and the boredom of household drudgery are all justified by this marvelous privilege she has of bringing children into the world. And now here is man asking woman to relinquish her triumph as a female in order to preserve his liberty" (491). However, it is important to note that De Beauvoir does not see the roles of wife and mother as inherently harmful to the condition of woman, but rather the forcing of these roles upon her as Object is what is harmful. In all things, woman must be allowed to act as Subject - freely choosing her role as wife, with whom she chooses this role, whether or not to assume motherhood by getting pregnant, and even whether or not to assume motherhood by choosing to keep a child once pregnant. Only by acting freely in consciousness with self-defining choices can woman then truly function as Subject rather than the position of Object she has been so long forced/allowed to assume.

This is thus De Beauvoir's "manifesto" as it were. However, even then, she is careful to acknowledge the difficulties woman's position as Subject is likely to create: "The emancipated woman . . . wants to be active, a taker, and refuses the passivity man means to impose her," but at the same time,
she often also wants the privileges of the "old fashioned-respect" of "femininity" (718). However, she
cannot demand both, and "woman, who is being emancipated from it [femininity], wishes none the less to
retain its privileges; and man, in that case, wants her to assume its limitations" (719). Man and woman,
in trying to establish their own individual identities through their relationship to one another, thus stand in
opposition to one another and "the complexity of the whole affair derives from the fact that each camp is
giving aid and comfort to the enemy; woman is pursuing a dream of submission, man a dream of
identification" (718). The central issue then becomes not so much a question of the sexes, but of all
human persons in relationship to one another. It is the "master-slave" opposition of Hegel with the added
danger that each person both wants to be defined by the other, thereby "yielding to the temptations of the
easy way" (bad faith), and simultaneously seeks to freely define their own essence as Subject.

Really, then, the plight of the woman is the plight of the existential person, and De Beauvoir's
demand for woman as Subject is not based so much on her definition of what it means to be a woman, but
what it means to be a person for whom "existence precedes essence." On what basis does she then make
her demand? It is evident from The Second Sex that De Beauvoir makes her demand for woman as Subject
on the basis that woman is a person, a Subject, who has made into an Object historically and has been
forced to remain so even to the modern day. In evaluating De Beauvoir's demand, then, it is the latter part
of this basis that potentially undermines De Beauvoir's continuing validity in contemporary society.

Perhaps ironically due much to her demand and reasoning, woman in contemporary Western society is as
politically free today as her male counterparts and has been increasingly given social freedoms of choice
in everything from the choice of her profession to her choice of partner. Although there are many
instances of the egregious oppression of women worldwide, woman as she appears, for instance, in the
modern American public is practically free to act as Subject in almost every area of her life and is forced
to the position of Object only if she so chooses. Thus, existentially, in America and from an objective
perspective, it could be argued that De Beauvoir’s demand has been largely realized – but what about personally? What about aesthetically? Perhaps the most interesting question concerning De Beauvoir’s work is of what relation is her existentialist perspective that one is able to define one’s own essence to the contemporary idea that attributes of the self, including gender, are socially-constructed? It is answer to such questions that *The Second Sex* retains contemporary importance and De Beauvoir’s ideas about what it means to be a woman have continuing significance both politically and socially and as they pertain to the active lives of individual woman throughout modern society.