One of the many obstacles and paradoxes in the path of women's liberation is the murky light at the end of the tunnel - once women are liberated, what will they really look like? There are different models of liberation, and there are different understandings of why it remains difficult. According to some people, among the many things women lack (and the things others have incorrectly said they lack) is an appropriate mythology of heroism. There have to be stars up there in the firmament leading one on through the darkness, and the Virgin Mary, Queens Elizabeth I and II or Margaret Thatcher simply aren't enough. But Simone de Beauvoir was: for an unbelievably long time she shone away up there, illuminating and inspiring our darkness. Death won't put the light out, but it does provide us with the opportunity to think more carefully about what she meant to us.

I never met her, but we exchanged a letter or two. I was given her magnificent *The Second Sex* in 1960 (when I was 16) by a boyfriend who didn't think I was, and who undoubtedly knew more than I did at that stage about the whole sorry business of gender. I have read most of what she has written and struggled to relate both to what it seems to me she did say and to what I felt she ought to be saying. (Both are equally important). I have used, and probably mis-used, her work and her example, but knowing that she probably wouldn't mind very much. Being a role-model is a lonely art, not least because it's impossible to take responsibility for all the models people mould themselves into.

Simone de Beauvoir achieved something extremely valuable, but intensely irritating - she said it all before most of us even suspected there was anything to say. So when it was our turn we could quarrel with forms of words and interpretations, and we could put it differently, but we couldn't ignore the fact that we had, like naughty children in the presence of a strong mother, been given a structure to react against - or agree with - or both.

De Beauvoir's constitution of women as a cultural construction in *The Second Sex* and its lesser known companion volume *The Nature of the Second Sex* provided the basic pacifist ammunition of the women's movement when it was reborn a decade later. Yet many ideological uses of this work unintentionally devalued its intellectual value; it has stature as a work of literature and of political and philosophical theory which will outlive its service to the shorter-term ends of feminism.

Simone de Beauvoir's volumes of autobiography present another kind of challenge. As others have noted, the four volumes published between 1958 and 1972 present her life as a rational and unified project. She recounts a version of events in which she is the controlling figure, deciding on their meaning to her and on which direction to take next, without any of the de-energising agonies most of us experience. Not only does she fulfil for us the social function of being a role-model, but she has the audacity to present herself as an example, when that is the interpretation we ourselves wanted to be able to put on her life and its representation in her work. She takes the words out of our mouths, but she nonetheless leaves us with the feeling that she's covering up something, an underworld of experienced oppression perhaps; hatred of men, unresolved fears and anxieties, improper conduct or merely