ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Maternal Detachment in Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958) and Sarraute's *Childhood* (1983)

Iris Thirlwall

August 2025

'My intellectual life – embodied by my father – and my spiritual life – expressed by my mother – were two radically heterogeneous fields of experience which had nothing in common' (Beauvoir, Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, 41)

Both *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (MDD) and *Childhood* portray maternal relationships that are characterised by detachment. This essay aims to explain how such detachment arises for both authors: I argue that maternal withdrawal is triggered by contradictions that the authors perceive in their parents' thought and behaviour. For the purpose of this essay, I define a contradiction as two established concepts existing simultaneously that are incompatible; one is forced to choose between them. This idea aligns with Beauvoir's philosophy: her view that contradictions lead to an increased critical attitude and separation from authority is explicitly stated in her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947). She states that "it is very rare for the infantile world to maintain itself beyond adolescence… [the child] begins to vacillate because he notices the contradictions among adults, as well as their weakness" (Beauvoir, EoA 37). I will explore contradictions relating to gender and religion in *MDD*; and in *Childhood*, relating to her parents' respective treatment of her. I will also explore how the form of *MDD* and *Childhood* reflects the stage of maternal separation that Beauvoir and Sarraute have reached by their time of writing.

In childhood, Beauvoir perceives her parents in rigid categories. Each corresponds to contradicting sides of her character: "my intellectual life – embodied by my father – and my spiritual life – expressed by my mother – were two radically heterogeneous fields of experience which had nothing in common" (Beauvoir *MDD* 41). Both parents' spheres of influence existed parallel to one another as Beauvoir simultaneously succeeded academically and maintained her faith: "so deeply did I feel myself penetrated by the presence of God" (41). Maternal separation begins for Beauvoir when she realises how the differing aspects of herself, represented respectively by her parents, are gendered. She notes how "on the whole, it was the women who went to church", and that "the greatest writers shared [her father's] scepticism" (136). This realisation of the contradiction between her two beliefs forces her to choose between them; since rationally, she cannot believe in religious theories,

intellectualism is preferred. Beauvoir consequently alienates herself from her mother, whose beliefs she no longer sympathises with, instead identifying with academic ambition and thus, masculinity.

Beauvoir's preeminent perception of gender also influences this decision. She expresses the belief that "women belong to an inferior caste" and that her father's prestige had "strengthened that opinion" (145). Her father notably influences Beauvoir's decision to become a writer, as "he rated them higher than scholars" (141). Undeniably, the strict association of her parents with alternative sides contributing to her development works in favour of her father, and against her mother. Beauvoir's sentiment supposes that her mother's beliefs are weaker than her father's, in part because she is a woman. In this way, she has acknowledged her mother's weakness in religion, and distanced herself from it. Portuges argues that "differentiation from the mother is the process undertaken in order to gain reconciliation of the masculine and the feminine" (118). Indeed, through her disbelief of religion, Beauvoir no longer equates femininity with the pious values her mother champions; reconciliation begins through Beauvoir's realisation that she can be a woman outside of religion, and simultaneously practise academia.

Religion continues to influence Beauvoir's separation from her mother profoundly through the lens of physical femininity. She is taught to associate shame with her developing body due to Françoise's religious beliefs: her breasts are "obscene", and the consequence of "physical disability" (102). Ostensibly, puberty draws Beauvoir closer to her mother – Françoise is "taken into confidence" (101) and Beauvoir, as a child, accepts that she has entered into the shameful "monstrous regiment of women" (ibid) alongside her. Separation between them occurs only once her father is aware: Beauvoir notes how she had imagined that this "blemish" would be kept a secret from the "male fraternity" (ibid). Her mother's actions present a contradiction between the supposed shame of femininity, and her father

being aware of it, which Beauvoir cannot reconcile. Her use of “fraternity” suggests masculine exclusivity which women cannot be a part of, instead occupying a lower rank as “monstrous”. When Françoise joins the fraternity, Beauvoir is seemingly betrayed, resulting in vacillation and disillusionment from her mother’s values.

Preeminent emotional distance from her mother catalyses Sarraute’s maternal detachment, which is further caused by physical distance between Sarraute and her father, and later, between her and her mother. With no comparison between her parents to be made due to her distance from her father, as a child, Sarraute is victim to more explicit isolation from her mother than Beauvoir. Sarraute is excluded from her mother’s marriage: she notes her attempt to protect Polina during a pretend conflict with Kolya, which fails when her efforts are regarded as an intrusion (24). Despite separation seemingly being desired by Polina, a contradiction in her behaviour is recognisable as a factor causing Sarraute’s withdrawal from her later in *Childhood*: she desires separation and authority simultaneously. Sarraute is subject to emotional isolation regarding her tendency to insult her mother – Polina establishes a layer of distance between the two when she expresses dismay that Sarraute feels at liberty to insult her beauty (30). Desire for compliance to authority is further presented when Polina labels Sarraute “a monster of egotism” (72) after she chooses the company of Vera over her mother (71). Patterson states that *Childhood* is “the drama of an abandoned child who seeks and needs her mother's love but finds it always just out of reach” (154); in relation to the beginning of *Childhood,* Sarraute is arguably abandoned even before physical separation from her mother. Polina’s love is taken out of reach when Sarraute fails to conform to her contradictory desires.

Contradictions further define her maternal detachment upon Sarraute’s move to France. Sarraute subsequently forms a closer relationship with her father, who “is the only one who is present everywhere” (17); this ultimately results in vacillation when Sarraute

realises the contradiction in her parents' attitudes towards her. Whereas her father fosters a close relationship with her, Polina chooses emotional and physical distance from Sarraute. The incompatibility in their attitudes towards her forces Sarraute to choose her father's love over her mother's dislike.

The categorisation of education to her father – the same in *MDD* - plays a significant role in the separation between Polina and Sarraute. Jefferson remarks how school provided a private channel of communication with Ilya who was "only too happy to encourage his daughter's academic ambitions" (20). Arguably, Polina's exclusion from this element of Sarraute's upbringing is by chance, as her age at the time of departure to France dictated her not-yet developed interest in literature. However, Jefferson references Polina's literary background (30). Given this information, Polina's absent influence on Sarraute's literary pursuits during childhood arguably confirms her disinterest in connection with her daughter. Sarraute associates literature instead with her father; their shared interest compared with Polina's absence compromises the contradiction between Sarraute's parents which causes her to realise her mother's indifference. It is this that catalyses Sarraute's decision to remain in the care of her father. Both writers thus make an active decision to differentiate themselves from maternity following the observation of a contradiction between their parents: Beauvoir in abandoning religion, Sarraute in maintaining physical distance. Jefferson's statement no longer applies once Sarraute is aware of her mother's contradictory behaviour; she no longer reaches for Polina's love.

The form of *Childhood* suggests that Sarraute, despite having undergone the same process of maternal separation as Beauvoir in that she became weary of contradictions in her mother's behaviour, and between her mother and her father's treatment of her, has not yet been completely separated from her mother. Sarraute's narrative style is doubtful and hesitant: it is split into two voices. One communicates Sarraute's intentions in writing

autobiographically; the other takes on the role of accusatory interlocuter. Gratton suggests that this "displays misgivings about the idea of replotting her childhood" (34). In light of this, I argue that Sarraute's hesitancy is caused by a fear of exposing Polina's role in her childhood. Polina's simultaneous desire for authority and separation being unattainable for Sarraute to comply to in childhood resulted in detachment. Thus, the maintenance of her maternal relationship became her responsibility. Sarraute's retrospective narration suggests that she continues to harbour responsibility towards her relationship with her mother, in that her misgivings about autobiography are due to fear of not portraying a whole truth. Such responsibility can be read as influencing Sarraute's eventual attribution of her literary pursuits to a gift from her mother, as Jefferson notes. Sarraute seemingly feels guilt about portraying her mother in a negative light. This presents an inherent difference between Sarraute and Beauvoir's reactions to contradictions in their childhood that they have perceived.

Contrastingly, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) is suggestive of prevailing detachment from her mother. Her statement that "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" undoubtedly draws on her mother's influence on her: Beauvoir was taught that shame equates to womanhood. Beauvoir goes on to refute this concept of innate female inferiority; there remains a separation between Beauvoir's feminist thought, and her mother's views expressed in *MDD*. In comparison to Sarraute's hesitant narration, I interpret the straightforward and analytical style of *MDD* as Beauvoir being at peace with her maternal relationship – she no longer adheres to her mother's values, and can replot her childhood without fear of losing the relationship.

To conclude, contradictions are thus a fundamental cause of maternal separation in both texts. However, where Beauvoir has seemingly overcome this change in their relationship, Sarraute, at the time of writing *Childhood*, was still in the process of separation; she feels guilt about portraying her mother untruthfully autobiographically. Further

examination of this topic would explore why Beauvoir and Sarraute have differing reactions to detachment from their mothers and therefore, why Sarraute's maternal separation is ongoing. This essay has focused on the inherent contradictions that both writers witnessed in childhood, which led to separation in the maternal relationships of each.

Works Cited

Beauvoir, Simone. *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, translated by James Kirkup, Penguin Classics, 1981.

Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Philosophical Library/Open Road, 2015.

Gratton, Johnnie. 'Autobiography and Fragmentation: The Case of Nathalie Sarraute's "Enfance".' *Nottingham French Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, 1995, pp. 31-40.

Jefferson, Ann. *Nathalie Sarraute: A Life Between*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

Patterson, Yolanda Astarita. 'Childhood Memories: Nathalie Sarraute's "Enfance" and Simone de Beauvoir's "Mémoires d'une Jeune Fille Rangée".' *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, vol. 4, 1987, pp. 151-157.

Portuges, Catherine. 'Attachment and Separation in "Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter".' *Yale French Studies*, no 72, 1986, pp. 107.

Nathalie Sarraute. *Childhood*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.