

FEMINIST EXISTENTIALISM IN DONNA WOOLFOLK CROSS'S POPE JOAN

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of women in Donna Woolfolk Cross's *Pope Joan* through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. The novel portrays a range of female experiences within a rigidly patriarchal religious and social system, making it a relevant and urgent site for analyzing how women navigate subordination, exercise agency, and construct resistance. This study aims to identify forms of women's subordination, freedom, and resistance in the novel, and to classify the female characters according to Beauvoir's typology: *the Hetaira*, *the Narcissistic Woman*, and *the Mystical Woman*. This descriptive qualitative study utilizes the text of *Pope Joan* as its primary data source, supplemented by secondary sources related to existentialist feminist theory. Data were collected through library research by reading, selecting, and classifying relevant excerpts. The analysis employed content analysis to identify scenes illustrating gendered power relations and women's existential positioning, interpret them through Beauvoir's concepts of immanence, transcendence, and otherness, and draw conclusions regarding the characters' strategies of resistance. The findings show that Joan embodies *the Hetaira* who rejects immanence and pursues transcendence through education and critical reasoning. Gudrun and Richild represent the *Narcissistic Woman*, displaying limited and illusory autonomy shaped by patriarchal boundaries. Meanwhile, Gisla and Arn's Mother exemplifies the *Mystical Woman*, fully internalizing patriarchal norms and accepting their subordinated role. These classifications reveal diverse existential responses toward patriarchy, and the novel also highlights that women's agency emerges when they challenge imposed boundaries, affirming the relevance of Beauvoir's existentialist feminism in literary analysis.

Keywords

De Beauvoir's Feminist Oppression, *Pope Joan*, Religion.



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INTRODUCTION

Religion has long been viewed as a powerful force that motivates individuals to risk or even sacrifice their lives in defense of their beliefs (Iannaccone & Berman, 2006; Wessells & Strang, 2006). Armstrong (2016) argues that humans are inherently spiritual beings who, feeling vulnerable before life's uncertainties, seek calm and protection through a metaphysical presence (God) whom they worship through religious practice. However, Armstrong notes that religion faces a dilemma when the divine is framed with male pronouns, particularly in Catholicism and Christianity, implying that religious authority belongs primarily to men. This gendered interpretation positions men as the sole interpreters of sacred texts, while women are relegated to passive followers and systematically excluded from leadership roles.

Patriarchal values embedded in many monotheistic traditions further reinforce women's subordination. Women are portrayed as companions who must comply with male authority, a narrative that sustains gender oppression. To maintain dominance, men construct cultural myths depicting women as weaker, less rational, and confined to domestic roles. As Lewis (2012) notes, women who demonstrate strength, intelligence, and public agency are often treated as anomalies. Those patriarchal narratives are sustained not only through religious interpretation but also through social institutions that normalize gender hierarchy. Over time, these structures shape women's internal perceptions of their own capacities, making subordination appear natural rather than constructed. Consequently, religion and culture interact to produce a self-perpetuating system of gender inequality that limits women's opportunities for autonomy.

Within this context, the legend of a female pope "Joan" emerged in ninth century Europe. Although many dismissed her story as a myth (Blažić & Iseni, 2025; Machielsen, 2025), Bayle in Rustici (2006) argues that its acceptance depended largely on the interests of its supporters. The controversy remains significant because women are strictly prohibited from holding high religious office in Catholicism, including the papacy. This legend later inspired Donna Woolfolk Cross to write *Pope Joan* (1996). The persistence of this legend, despite limited historical evidence, indicates a collective cultural fascination with the possibility of women transcending religious barriers. It also reflects broader anxieties within patriarchal institutions about the destabilizing potential of female authority.

Cross's novel portrays Joan's struggle for education and religious authority in the rigidly patriarchal society of medieval Europe. The narrative highlights issues of gender inequality,

restrictive gender roles, and male domination of the religious sphere. The female characters exhibit diverse responses to patriarchy which is ranging from full submission to strategic compliance or subtle resistance. These varied portrayals provide a rich foundation for examining the characters through the lens of feminist existentialism (O'Brien & Embree, 2001). Joan's journey also illustrates how patriarchal restrictions are not merely external obstacles but internalized boundaries that shape women's sense of possibility. Through Joan's acts of resistance, the novel foregrounds the existential struggle women face in asserting subjectivity within oppressive religious and social structures.

The study employs a feminist approach to analyze the novel by examining both its implicit and explicit elements, particularly the power relations between men and women and the characters' forms of resistance. Among various feminist perspectives, this research adopts Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism, which draws on Sartrean concepts of the Self and the Other (Tong, 2010; Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2013) explains women's subordination as a socially constructed condition that positions men as the absolute subject and women as the object or the Other (De Beauvoir, 1997). This framework also highlights how patriarchal myths and norms restrict women to immanence while denying their transcendence (Tandon, 2013). Such concepts make Beauvoir's approach the most suitable for interpreting *Pope Joan*, a novel that centers on women's struggle for autonomy within a rigidly patriarchal religious and social structure.

Aminatul Hudnah (2020) examined *Pope Joan*, utilizing Naomi Wolf's feminist literary criticism to highlight the various forms of gender discrimination faced by Joan and to demonstrate how she resisted them through education, escape, and disguising herself as a man. Rahmat Julaini (2017) applied structural theory to investigate the portrayal of female characters in the novel. Meanwhile, Sipaliana's (2015) study used Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism to analyze women's bodily resistance in *Namaku Hiroko*, yet did not explore the religious dimension of women's representation. Therefore, no previous research has applied feminist existentialism to *Pope Joan* or examined women's existential struggles within religious structures, which is an analytical gap this study seeks to address.

Based on the research gap, this study aims to examine how forms of women's subordination, freedom, and resistance are represented in *Pope Joan* through the framework of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. Beauvoir's approach emphasizes that women become "the Other" because of a social construction that places men as the center of authority, so the researcher will examine how the female characters in the novel experience, accept, negotiate, or reject the position of "the Other",

especially in the context of religious institutions that are full of patriarchy. Thus, this study not only identifies forms of gender inequality in the story, but also explains how the existential experiences of the female characters—such as the search for identity, the struggle to gain freedom, and actions that go beyond culturally determined boundaries—embody Beauvoir's concepts such as immanence, transcendence, and ambiguity.

METHOD

This research is a descriptive qualitative study employing a feminist literary criticism approach, specifically Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. The primary data consist of the text of *"Pope Joan," a novel by Donna Woolfolk Cross (2007), which was analyzed to identify the forms of subordination, freedom, and resistance experienced by the female characters.* The secondary data include books, journal articles, and literature on existentialist feminist theory, particularly Beauvoir's concept of woman as the Other, which asserts that "men regard themselves as the absolute subject while women are reduced to objects" (De Beauvoir, 1997). This framework enables a deeper understanding of how the novel reflects structures of domination that shape women's existential conditions.

Data collection was conducted through library research, which involved reading, note-taking, and classifying relevant excerpts from the novel and supporting theoretical sources. All data were categorized according to Beauvoir's three classifications of women: the prostitute/the Hetaira, the narcissistic woman, and the mystical woman. This categorization allowed the researcher to map the diverse forms of female experience represented in the narrative. It also provided a structured lens for identifying how each character negotiates or challenges patriarchal constraints. The systematic organization of data further facilitated a coherent analytical process that aligns with the theoretical framework applied in the following stage of analysis.

Data analysis employed content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016) through the following steps: (1) identifying excerpts or scenes that represent power relations, gender constructions, and women's existential experiences; (2) interpreting the data based on Beauvoir's concepts such as immanence, transcendence, and otherness, which correspond to the categories of the prostitute/the Hetaira, the narcissistic woman, and the mystical woman; and (3) concluding the positioning and strategies of resistance enacted by the female characters in *Pope Joan*, the analysis was conducted interpretively to uncover both the implicit and explicit meanings within the literary text. This

analytical process ensured that the interpretation remained grounded in both textual evidence and theoretical principles.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The data analysis in this study was conducted by identifying six major phenomena involving female characters, who served as the primary data sources representing five women in the novel *Pope Joan*: Joan, Gudrun, Richild, Gisla, and Arn's mother. Each data point was classified into Beauvoir's three categories of women: the Hetaira, the Narcissistic Woman, and the Mystical Woman, to trace patterns of power relations, forms of compliance, and acts of resistance within the narrative. This process produced a detailed mapping, ranging from Joan's actions that reflect active resistance against male domination to the passive attitudes of Gisla and Arn's Mother, illustrating acceptance of patriarchal norms. A summary of these findings is presented in Table 4.1 as the foundation for further discussion on the construction of women in the novel.

Table 1. Role and Classification of Women Characters in *Pope Joan* Based on the Beauvoir Concept

No	Character	Novel Quotation / Data	Beauvoir's Category	Brief Explanation
1	Joan	<p>"Her father was hunched in a chair, head bowed, hands covering his face. He did not stir as Joan approached. She halted, suddenly afraid. The idea was impossible, ridiculous; Father would never approve. She was about to retreat when he took his hands from his face and looked up. She stood before him with the open book in her hands.</p> <p>Her voice was nervously unsteady as she began to read, "<i>In principio erat verbum et verbum erat apud Deum et verbum erat Deus ...</i>"</p> <p>There was no interruption; she kept on, gaining confidence as she read.</p>	The Hetaira	Joan challenges the dominant patriarchal myths about women by subjecting them to rational scrutiny.
2	Joan	<p>...Unsatisfied with the limited recognition granted by her brother, Joan pursues validation from a higher ecclesiastical authority by showcasing her exegetical competence. Odo, a teacher within the Church, challenges her with multiple questions derived from Latin scriptural verses, expecting her to fail. Joan, however, responds with confidence and</p>	The Hetaria	This demonstration compels the bishop to acknowledge Joan's intellectual acuity.

		accuracy, effectively dismantling Odo's gendered presumption of her inferiority		
3	Gudrun (Joan's Mother)	...She defies her husband's prohibitions by telling Joan forbidden pagan tales, believing this act to be an expression of autonomy, even though such autonomy exists only within narrowly defined limits	The Narcistics	Gudrun embodies the narcissistic woman role as she perceives herself to have agency only in the absence of her husband, a priest.
4	Gudrun (Joan's Mother)	... when her husband—the priest—warns her not to let her hair fall freely, asserting that its beauty constitutes a demonic snare capable of leading men into temptation, Gudrun submits by braiding and covering it beneath her hood. She removes the braids only when he is away. Upon discovering her hair unbound inside their home, the priest punished her by forcibly cutting it with a knife, and Gudrun offered no resistance	The Narcistics	woman lives within boundaries constructed by men
5	Richild	... Convinced that her aristocratic position confers upon her superior social status, she assumes the right to control those around her. This perceived superiority enables her to orchestrate Joan's arranged marriage and to pressure the bishop into authorizing Joan's departure from the <i>schola</i> ... Her arrogance emerges from her self-identification as a noblewoman. Yet such nobility is merely an inherited status from her parents—more precisely, from her father	The Narcistics	Richild's sense of personal freedom is ultimately constrained by a status she did not earn but inherited, and which continues to be sustained through her marriage to another nobleman.
6	Gisla	...At the age of fifteen, Gisla is delighted to be married off to a man she has never met	Mythical Women	Gisla fails to recognize the arranged marriage as an infringement of her freedom; rather, she embraces it willingly.
7	Arn's Mother	...Arn's mother, a woman wrongfully accused of leprosy and sentenced by the Church to exile. Despite her desperate pleas, because she has several small children, she is left without recourse. Joan, perceiving that her illness is not leprosy, argues for proper treatment. Arn's mother eventually recovers and remarries, seeking economic security and a better life after getting help from Joan.	Mythical Woman	Arn's mother is seeking economic security and a better life by marrying.

The data presented in the table reveal a clear distribution of six key data points representing five female characters in the novel—Joan, Gudrun, Richild, Gisle, and Arn's Mother. These data points illustrate how each woman embodies Beauvoir's typology of *the Hetaira*, *the Narcissistic Woman*, and *the Mystical Woman*. Through this classification, the analysis uncovers the varied ways in which the characters negotiate, resist, or internalize patriarchal norms. The interpretations derived from these data form the basis for understanding the novel's overarching critique of gendered power and the construction of women as the Other. Collectively, these variations underscore the novel's insistence that women's existential positions are neither uniform nor fixed, but shaped by the intersecting forces of culture, belief, and personal agency.

The character Joan emerges consistently as the Hetaira, representing a woman who refuses immanence and actively pursues transcendence through intellectual effort and critical reasoning. In the first data, Joan takes the bold step of reading sacred scripture before her father—an action that directly challenges the belief that women are unworthy of religious education. The next data further strengthens her position as she successfully answers Odo's theological questions, dismantling his assumption of female inferiority. Through her rational competence, Joan not only resists patriarchal boundaries but also exposes the flawed epistemological foundations that justify women's subordination. Her actions embody Beauvoir's idea that the Hetaira is not merely rebellious but consciously constructs her own existential path by rejecting the roles imposed upon her.

The character Gudrun, Joan's mother, represents the Narcissistic Woman who experiences only limited and illusory freedom. The data shows Gudrun exercising small acts of autonomy—such as telling pagan stories—yet only when her husband is absent, highlighting that her “freedom” is contingent upon the temporary withdrawal of male authority. Further, she reveals her internalized submission, demonstrated by her compliance with her husband's demand to conceal her hair and her silent acceptance of punishment. Gudrun exemplifies Beauvoir's notion of women who believe themselves to possess personal agency, yet their agency never escapes the boundaries imposed by patriarchal power. Her form of narcissism is passive and fearful, shaped by the desire to fulfill the expectations of the male subject rather than her own self-defined will.

The data also highlight Richild as another example of the Narcissistic Woman, though expressed in a contrasting form. Unlike Gudrun, Richild's perceived autonomy stems not from fear but from a sense of superiority rooted in her aristocratic lineage. Data 5 illustrates her efforts to control Joan's fate—arranging her marriage and influencing church authorities—based on her belief

that her social status legitimizes her power. However, her status itself is inherited from men: first her father and then her husband. Thus, Richild's dominance is a façade, a reflection of patriarchal privilege rather than true autonomy. This shows a second mode of narcissistic femininity: dominance built upon structures created by men, not a freedom cultivated by women themselves.

The final two characters—Gisla and Arn's Mother—both manifest as the Mystical Woman, representing women who internalize patriarchal norms to the point of embracing their own subordination. In the data, Gisla accepts an arranged marriage with enthusiasm, demonstrating her belief that marriage is her natural destiny. She does not perceive the loss of freedom inherent in the arrangement; instead, she treats it as a fulfillment of womanhood. The data presents Arn's Mother, who, despite being mistreated by church authorities, seeks stability and protection through remarriage. This decision aligns with Beauvoir's argument that mystical women perceive patriarchy not as oppression but as a source of security and meaning. Both characters reveal how deeply patriarchal ideology can shape women's understanding of their roles, leading them to accept constraints on their autonomy willingly.

Taken together, the data illustrate three distinct existential positions occupied by women in the novel: (1) active resistance and pursuit of transcendence (Joan), (2) constrained autonomy shaped by male-defined boundaries (Gudrun and Richild), and (3) full internalization and acceptance of patriarchal norms (Gisla and Arn's Mother). These findings demonstrate not only the applicability of Beauvoir's typology to *Pope Joan* but also the novel's broader critique of patriarchal systems that operate through religious institutions, familial structures, and cultural myths. The diversity of female experiences depicted in the narrative underscores that women do not respond uniformly to oppression; instead, their positions are shaped by their social environments, internalized beliefs, and available opportunities for agency. Through this layered representation, the novel exposes how patriarchy produces, sustains, and legitimizes the Otherness of women, while also highlighting the possibilities of resistance through intellectual and existential awakenin

Women as the *Other* and the Construction of Myths in Society

Men construct themselves as the autonomous subject while relegating those who are not male to the position of the Other, a hierarchical configuration that legitimizes men's authority to define, control, and oppress women, thereby sustaining a gendered power asymmetry. In such relations, the Other is inevitably subordinated to the subject; thus, men are perceived as dominant and as possessing inherent rights over women. This dynamic of otherness is also made evident in

Pope Joan through the naturalized attributes assigned to women's bodies. The dialogue between Matthew and Joan—following their father's punishment of their mother for recounting forbidden tales and appearing without a head covering—demonstrates how patriarchal norms categorize women as the Other within the narrative's social context.

"Yes," Matthew broke in. "Mama had to be punished for the good of her soul. She was disobedient to her husband, and that also is against the law of God."

"Why?"

"Because it says so in the Holy Book." He began to recite, "'For the husband is the head of the wife; therefore, let the wives submit themselves unto their husbands in everything.'"

"Why?"

"Why?" Matthew was taken aback. No one had ever asked him that before. "Well, I guess because ... because women are by nature inferior to men. Men are bigger, stronger, and smarter." " (Cross, 2007)

The expression "...by nature inferior to men..." conveys an essentialist assumption that women's supposed inferiority is divinely mandated and rooted in their biological bodies. This framing constructs female embodiment as inherently different from male. The passage demonstrates the way men experienced internalized hegemonic narratives from a young age that position women as naturally subordinate to men due to biological differences, a notion further legitimized by religion through sacred texts. Such a belief system reinforces a rigid gender hierarchy in which women's roles are confined to immanence while men occupy positions of transcendence. Consequently, this ideological structure not only naturalizes domination but also restricts the possibility of resistance by presenting inequality as an unquestionable truth. Another character who articulates a similar idea was Odo. He echoed this ideology by arguing that women were, by nature, lower than men and thus cannot reasonably aspire to equality.

"—Odo's voice assumed an authoritative ring, for now he was on familiar ground—"women are innately inferior to men."

"Why?" The word was out of Joan's mouth before she was even aware of having spoken.

Odo smiled, his thin lips drawing back unpleasantly. He had the look of the fox when it knows it has the rabbit cornered. "Your ignorance, child, is revealed in that question. For St. Paul himself has asserted this truth, that women are beneath men in conception, in place, and in will." " (Cross, 2007)

The notions of "concept," "place," and "will" refer to the narrative of human creation in which Adam is formed before Eve. In the Abrahamic traditions, Eve is said to have originated from Adam's rib, a detail often interpreted to mean that Eve—as a representation of women—is merely a smaller extension of Adam, who represents men. Eve's "place" or position is defined as Adam's companion, a role that implies complementarity but also lesser significance. The analogy is similar to that of a car and its fuel: while fuel is essential, the car is generally considered the more valuable

entity. One may prefer losing the fuel to losing the car, illustrating the hierarchy of value, even though the car cannot function without fuel. Finally, the matter of “will” positions women’s desires as inherently tied to sensual impulses, which are viewed as the root of sin—typified through Eve’s inability to resist the forbidden fruit.

Odo’s arguments are closely tied to the religious tradition he upholds. Religion, as a cultural construct, emerges from human interpretation of the divine. Sacred texts and their interpretations have historically been the domain of men, resulting in interpretive biases that frequently marginalize women. Such biased interpretations serve to preserve male dominance by sustaining male privilege. The interpretive outcome is the production of myths. As Odo suggests, the story of Adam and Eve generates the myth that women are temptresses and inherently sinful, making them unworthy of equality with men. These myths, once institutionalized, function as powerful ideological tools that legitimize patriarchal authority while rendering women’s subordination both natural and divinely sanctioned.

These myths are continuously produced and reproduced within society until they become perceived as natural and self-evident truths. The belief that women are associated with desire, sin, impurity, and inherent weakness forms a hegemonic discourse that shapes collective consciousness. This discourse is not only imposed by men but is also internalized by some women, who accept these stereotypes as part of social reality. Consequently, women are considered unfit to engage in matters associated with men, just as men are deemed unsuitable to involve themselves in areas culturally constructed as feminine. In this way, myths operate as powerful ideological tools that uphold gender hierarchies and sustain structural inequality. As these myths solidify, they limit the horizon of possibilities available to women, constraining not only their social roles but also their imagination of what they can become.

Interrogating Religious Narratives on Women Through Joan

The most compelling twist in the storyline occurs at the end of the story. As a grand feast day unfolds, Joan faces the darkest event of her life. Gerold—her lover—was slain by a group of assailants while escorting her to attend Mass. Following this event, Joan experienced a miscarriage in front of a vast crowd and died soon after. The miscarriage was, in part, a consequence of Joan’s prior choice to ingest a potion intended to terminate her pregnancy.

“She screamed as with one last, agonizing pain the pressure inside suddenly gave way, spilling forth from her in a great red effusion.

The voice of Aurianos cut off abruptly, followed by a long, appalled silence.

Beneath the hem of Joan’s voluminous white robes, dyed now with her blood, there appeared the tiny

blue body of a premature infant.” (Cross, 2007).

The tragic conclusion of Joan’s narrative destabilizes earlier representations of the female body. Her body “betrays” her by exposing her gender, seemingly reinforcing the inevitability of female destiny. Yet this moment also signifies Joan’s disruption of the category of woman-as-Other. Had her pregnancy and miscarriage not been publicly revealed, her identity would have remained intact, leaving patriarchal myth-making unchallenged. The premature, tiny blue infant becomes a symbolic indictment of male superiority. Joan’s miscarriage discloses that her long-celebrated accomplishments were achieved not by a man but by a woman, illustrating that women can attain equal standing when afforded equal opportunity. This revelation exposes the fragility of patriarchal narratives that depend on the erasure of women’s agency to maintain the illusion of male exclusivity in intellectual and spiritual authority. The author’s resistance to entrenched myths about women emerges clearly in the passage that follows:

“Joan heard it all as if from a distance. Lying on the street in a pool of her own blood, she was suddenly suffused with a transcendent sense of peace. The street, the people, the colorful banners of the procession glowed in her mind with a strange brightness, like threads in an enormous tapestry whose pattern she only now discerned.

Her spirit swelled within her, filling the emptiness inside. She was bathed in a great and illuminating light. Faith and doubt, will and desire, heart and head—at long last she saw and understood that all were one, and that One was God.

The light grew stronger. Smilingly she went toward it as the sounds and colors of the world dimmed into invisibility, like the moon with the coming of dawn.” (Cross, 2007:710-711).

The line “... She was bathed in a great and illuminating light” indicates that Joan dies peacefully. This description carries an implicit critique of religious narratives: despite dying in the midst of a miscarriage brought on by an abortifacient, Joan is granted peace in death. According to religious teachings, both adultery and abortion are serious sins—violations of sanctity comparable to murder and believed to lead to eternal punishment. Yet the text portrays Joan, a figure who would be classified as a grave sinner, as meeting her death with calm. The passage suggests that the power to define sin belongs solely to God, not to humans. While abortion is morally forbidden, the narrative implies that humans should refrain from judging one another. Although religious discourse would label her a sinner, Joan is depicted as reaching a peaceful state, symbolized by her soul’s movement toward the light.

In the epilogue, the character Arnaldo—revealed to be a woman named Arnalda—adopts Joan’s ideals. She, too, disguises herself as a man to pursue education and opportunities otherwise denied to women. Joan’s death may not dismantle the patriarchal order portrayed in the story, but

her revealed identity becomes a source of inspiration for Arnalda. This ensures that Joan's death is not in vain and suggests that the pursuit of gender equality continues as long as patriarchy persists. Arnalda's decision to follow Joan's path indicates that resistance can take root even in the most restrictive environments. Her transformation also demonstrates how Joan's transcendence generates a ripple effect, empowering other women to challenge the limits imposed upon them. In this way, the epilogue positions Joan not merely as a solitary figure of defiance, but as the origin point of a continuing legacy of female autonomy.

Discussion

Beauvoir Immanence and Transcendence in *Pope Joan* Novel

In examining the female characters of *Pope Joan* through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, the concepts of immanence and transcendence provide the primary analytical framework. Beauvoir asserts that patriarchal societies tend to confine women to immanence, a condition in which they are positioned as passive beings whose identities are shaped by domestic roles, obedience, and dependence on male authority. Transcendence, by contrast, signifies a movement beyond these constraints—an assertion of agency, intellectual autonomy, and self-determination that challenges the boundaries imposed by gender norms. The novel presents a wide range of female experiences that occupy different points along this existential spectrum, from characters who fully accept patriarchal expectations to those who actively question and resist them. To visualize these varying degrees of compliance and resistance, the following figure maps each major female character according to Beauvoir's continuum of immanence and transcendence.

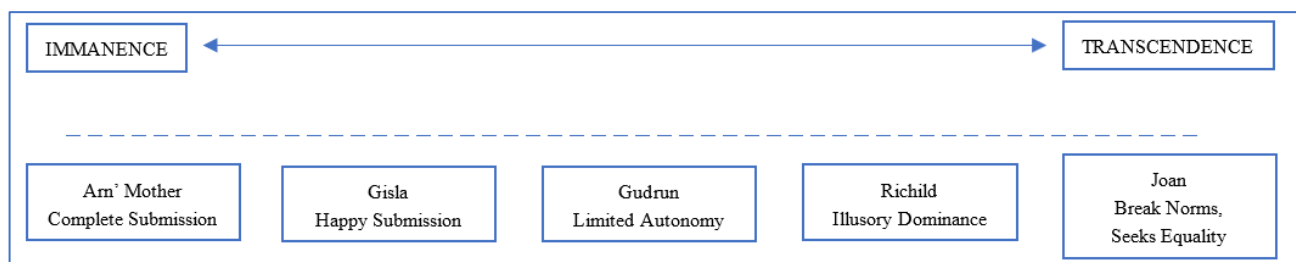


Figure 1. Immanence to Transcendence Visual on Characters in *Pope Joan*

The figure illustrates how the principal female characters in *Pope Joan* are situated along Beauvoir's continuum, offering a visual representation of their existential positioning. At the farthest end of immanence stands Arn's Mother, whose complete submission to patriarchal norms reflects an unquestioned acceptance of male authority. Slightly further along the spectrum is Gisle, whose joyful acceptance of an arranged marriage demonstrates a form of "happy submission." Near the

midpoint, Gudrun exhibits limited autonomy through small acts of resistance performed only in the absence of her husband. Richild is positioned closer to transcendence due to her assertiveness and perceived authority, yet this power is ultimately illusory, as it derives from aristocratic privilege. At the opposite end of the continuum stands Joan, who actively disrupts gender norms, pursues knowledge, and challenges ecclesiastical authority.

Taken together, this continuum demonstrates the novel's nuanced portrayal of women's varied responses to patriarchy—from complete compliance to deliberate resistance—while highlighting the complex ways in which female characters navigate and sometimes subvert the structures that define them. Donna Woolfolk Cross's *Pope Joan* presents a pointed critique of patriarchal values, especially within social and religious institutions that regulate and constrain women's existence. The positioning of these characters across the continuum reinforces that women's existential stances are shaped not only by personal character but also by the cultural and structural forces surrounding them. Through this mapping, the narrative emphasizes that women's actions cannot be understood as uniform; rather, their responses emerge from different configurations of belief, opportunity, and internalized norms.

The analysis of female characters through Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism further reveals how the novel constructs a spectrum of women who occupy distinct positions between immanence and transcendence. The findings of this study show that while characters such as Arn's Mother and Gisla fully internalize patriarchal norms, others, like Gudrun and Richild, maneuver within restricted spaces of autonomy, and only Joan succeeds in transcending the socially imposed boundaries. This layered representation affirms Beauvoir's assertion that patriarchy produces women as the Other, yet also enables moments of resistance when women refuse to remain confined by the roles assigned to them. Joan, in particular, embodies transcendence by challenging the epistemic, social, and religious structures that designate women as subordinate subjects, demonstrating that oppression is neither natural nor absolute, but socially constructed and therefore contestable.

When positioned within the broader scholarly discourse, the present study both affirms and extends existing research on patriarchy and women's agency. For instance, Aminatul Hudnah's (2020) study identifies the forms of gender discrimination Joan faces, aligning with this study's finding that structural barriers—especially in education, domestic life, and the Church—serve as mechanisms of immanence. However, while Hudnah emphasizes the forms of discrimination, this

study moves further by mapping the degrees of existential positioning each female character occupies, offering a more nuanced classification grounded in Beauvoir's conceptual framework. Moreover, Hideg and Shen's (2019) argument that benevolent sexism can paradoxically support women's advancement while reinforcing their subordinate status resonates with the portrayal of institutional contradictions in *Pope Joan*.

Joan's temporary acceptance within the ecclesiastical hierarchy reflects precisely this duality: she is permitted to rise only under the disguise of masculinity, revealing that patriarchal structures may allow female competence but only when it remains invisible as female competence—thus reaffirming her subordination. This confirms the relevance of contemporary findings on sexism to historical and literary constructions of gendered power. Furthermore, Kim and Shah's (2021) critique of how female saints are historically framed through their sexual and marital status aligns with this study's observation that the novel destabilizes traditional narratives that reduce women to passive objects of religious discourse. Joan's depiction as a political and intellectual actor challenges the historical marginalization of women's agency within ecclesiastical authority.

This study's analysis thus supports Kim and Shah's argument while extending it to literary representation by demonstrating how fiction can recover women's political subjectivity where historical accounts have obscured it. Additionally, Khan et al. (2025) emphasize the complexities women face when negotiating autonomy within male-dominated cultural and institutional environments; this resonates strongly with Joan's struggle, which illustrates both the transformative potential of women's agency and the persistent obstacles embedded in patriarchal systems. In contrast, the present findings complicate their conclusion by showing that not all women resist patriarchal norms uniformly—some, like Gisla and Arn's Mother, willingly embrace immanence, suggesting that resistance is neither universal nor inevitable.

Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity further contextualizes the novel's depiction of gendered power. Their argument that masculinity is relational and continuously rearticulated in response to women's positions is evident in how male characters in *Pope Joan* navigate Joan's competence: they admire and rely on her intellect when she is presumed male, yet the revelation of her womanhood prompts immediate delegitimization. This finding affirms their theoretical proposition that patriarchal structures adapt to preserve male dominance even when women demonstrate equal or superior capabilities. The present study reinforces this insight by demonstrating how Joan's transcendence disrupts but does not dismantle the patriarchal

order, highlighting the elasticity of hegemonic masculinity in retaining authority.

Overall, the analysis presented here affirms earlier scholarship on patriarchy while extending it through a Beauvoirian reading that foregrounds existential positioning as a key lens for interpreting women's oppression and resistance. *Pope Joan* functions not only as a narrative of a woman who momentarily rises within a male-dominated institution, but also as a critique of the multilayered mechanisms—symbolic, cultural, and institutional—through which patriarchy sustains itself. By illustrating that women and men possess comparable intellectual capacities when afforded equal opportunities, the novel challenges the myths that uphold gender inequality. The findings of this study underscore the continued relevance of Beauvoir's concepts in understanding literary, historical, and contemporary manifestations of patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

The novel *Pope Joan* critiques the assumption that men naturally occupy a superior position by presenting Joan as a Hetaira figure who transcends patriarchal limits through intellectual and spiritual agency. The findings confirm that the female characters occupy different existential positions—from total submission to active resistance—supporting Beauvoir's view that women's oppression is socially constructed rather than biologically determined. This study also contributes a clear analytical advancement by systematically applying Beauvoir's typology (Hetaira, Narcissistic Woman, and Mystical Woman) to classify the characters, offering a more nuanced reading compared to previous research that focused only on discrimination or narrative structure. In this way, the study complements and extends earlier works by highlighting how patriarchal religious institutions shape women's existential freedom. Despite its contribution, the study has limitations, particularly in its focus on major characters and its exclusive reliance on Beauvoir's framework. Future research may explore additional characters, conduct comparative analyses with other religious-historical novels, or integrate intersectional and other feminist theories to capture broader dimensions of identity and oppression. Expanding the analysis beyond Beauvoir would also help illuminate how race, class, or sexuality intersect with gender to shape women's experiences in different narrative contexts. Such interdisciplinary approaches could provide a more holistic understanding of how patriarchal structures operate across diverse cultural and historical settings. These directions open space for deeper investigations into women's agency, patriarchal myth-making, and the continued relevance of existentialist feminism in literary criticism.

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