



**Philosophies of Choice Rooted in Ideas of Chastity: Women's Place in Christianity  
and Existentialism**  
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While young idealists tend to believe that society has progressed from the time when classic gender roles were rigidly enforced, women and men still are expected to fill very specific parts in day-to-day life. Oppressive gender roles have been permitted and even forced to continue, in part, because of the largely faith-based and, more specifically, Christian-based society that comprises the Western world. Even in existentialism's heyday in the late 19<sup>th</sup> through mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when many existentialist thinkers denounced religion and criticized faith, Christian ideals were extremely influential. Christianity's prevalence and its affects on existentialist's views of women can be seen in many existential texts and becomes especially obvious when using a Kierkegaardian lens, as contextualized by both de Beauvoir and contemporary feminist writers. Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf* all focus on male protagonists, with their only inclusions of women inadvertently falling into common stereotypes and misgivings. These three novels epitomize the sexism in existentialist work by touching upon religious undertones that emphasize sin and moral corruption. Through both a Kierkegaardian lens and the further examination of these themes utilizing the work of de Beauvoir and modern writers, the respective authors of these novels use women to underscore the depravity of Western culture as depicted by Christian notions of purity and morality, emphasizing the sexism embedded in Christianity and inevitably in existentialism.

In the Bible, the story of Adam and Eve establishes the Christian image of woman as an impure temptress. In the Garden of Eden, Eve ate the forbidden fruit and committed the original sin, not Adam. Because humans continue to repent for the original sin today, woman's role as the original wrongdoer has and will not be forgotten. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir reiterates the sentiment encouraged by this story; "Adam was led to sin by Eve and not Eve by Adam" (de Beauvoir 97). Thus, even today Christianity continues to emphasize women's connection to temptation and their representation of adultery, a connection which women have much difficulty overcoming. De Beauvoir explains, "in a

religion that holds the flesh accursed, woman becomes the devil's most fearsome temptation" (de Beauvoir 97). Women continue to be punished for Eve's sin: "the subordination of women has been ascribed... to a special punishment for woman's alleged sinfulness in the loss of the original paradise... Women have been denigrated, repressed, vilified, and persecuted by religious authority" (Ruether 10). Belief in the original sin translates into pressure for women to remain prudent and deny their sexuality, as embracing their desires means embracing corruption and adultery. Thus, repression continues, as women are criticized for coming to terms with their sexuality because this "openness" indicates sin. Harsh Christian standards trap women by forcing them to choose between their sexuality and their morality.

Praskovya and Ivan's relationship in *Ivan Ilych* illustrates the inherent (and destructive) contrast driven by Christian morality: society expects women to be sexually conservative, but any woman who does so is considered frigid and cruel. Although Tolstoy himself believed in God but did not subscribe to Christianity, Tolstoy's treatment of women employs undeniable religious undertones. As a woman in 1882, Ivan's wife Praskovya must have felt the pressure to live up to the standards of purity and submission dictated by religion. But Ivan (and Tolstoy's) depiction of her makes no mention of this. Instead, Tolstoy writes; "For no reason at all...his wife began to undermine the pleasure and propriety of their life: she became jealous without cause, demanded he be more attentive to her, found fault with everything, and created distasteful and ill-mannered scenes" (Tolstoy 49). Ivan's negative perception of his wife does not arise until after he has "conquered her," implying that once she is no longer pure (no longer a virgin) she also is no longer appealing (Tolstoy 48). Because the Bible reads; "Likewise, ye wives, [be] in subjection to your own husbands", Praskovya must have felt obligated to submit to Ivan and appease his sexual urges (Peter 1:3:1). But the couple's relationship deteriorates after they first have sex because of the guilt Ivan feels and the anger he takes out on Praskovya to relieve it. The dynamic between Ivan and Praskovya epitomizes the conflicts brought on by a society where

Christianity is omnipresent. Praskovya is condemned for being cruel and frigid after she sleeps with Ivan because of his guilt for engaging with the 'temptress', yet the consequences she would face for denying her sexuality and not sleeping with Ivan would be equally severe.

Hesse's *Steppenwolf* also draws upon images of woman as a seducer, namely with Maria, although his discourse focuses primarily on purity instead of morals and temptation. When Harry Heller first sleeps with Maria, he feels no remorse. He recalls the interaction as "that wonderful first night" and references the experience as a time of peace and contentment multiple times in the novel (Hesse 138). After his time with Maria, Harry begins to go out dancing at bars and clubs more frequently. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard scoffs at this lifestyle in a description of music.

Q One must look upon it as the work of the devil... Our age provides much fearful evidence of the demonic power with which music can seize hold of an individual, and of how this individual can in turn arouse and captivate the masses... in the seductive snares of dread. 83

Music as  
Progress  
(Jazz)

Hesse's explicit tie between his female protagonists (Maria and Hermine) and the sinful world of music establishes the sexist roots of his work: the impurity of the lifestyle they represent implies that his female characters should be viewed in this negative light. But although Christians like Kierkegaard would condemn his new lifestyle, Harry can justify giving into temptation because he chooses to continue to see Maria and all that she represents (the world of music and, inevitably, sin) positively. "The world of the dance and pleasure resorts, the cinemas, bars and hotel lounges that... had always had about it something trivial, forbidden, and degrading, was for Maria... the world pure and simple" (Hesse 138). Hesse's explicit references to purity tie directly to the notions of purity and acceptable behavior for women that remain standard today. Religion dictates that woman should abstain from sex and thus maintain this misconstrued image of purity for as long as possible. "What institutions want women to be is virginal. Pure. Innocent... [Yet] they demand that we perform sexually—be visibly appealing, and always available for consumption... Be pure... for as long as I want you to" (Valenti 300). By



maintaining this image of innocence, Harry is able to rid himself of the guilt he knows he should feel about sex outside of marriage and submission to sin.

Kierkegaard also portrays women as immature, perhaps also in an attempt to justify oppressing her and her desires. "She drew near to the man, happy as a child, humble as a child, wistful as a child... And lo and behold, her humble comfort became life's richest joy, her innocent pastime's life's beauty, her childlike play life's deepest meaning" (Kierkegaard 576-7). However, by refusing to accept women as individuals with their own sexuality and instead writing them off as "childish" or "childlike," characters like Harry and men like Kierkegaard severely constrict woman's freedom (Hesse 139; Kierkegaard 577). And by limiting his female characters to the role of the sexual temptress, Hesse effectively ignores women's place in the existentialist movement by preventing them from defining their own place in society: existentialism is meant to stress personal freedom, but Hesse allows his female characters little. Hesse's inclusion of Maria in *Steppenwolf* reinforces the gender roles set by Christianity. *why establish sexuality then?* ↓

Both *The Metamorphosis* and *Steppenwolf* illustrate woman's struggle to escape the traditional gender roles instilled upon them as they simultaneously strive for lives that keep them dependent on men. This dichotomy comes from the sense of dependence and insecurity fostered by Christianity. The Bible tells women; "...the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman [is] the man; and the head of Christ [is] God", implying both that man is not only entitled but expected to serve as the "head", the thinker for woman and that God is found within men but not women (Corinthians 1:11:3). Biblical standards ensure that "women [are] assigned a inferior and defective humanity... or else idealized and applauded for submission to narrowly circumscribed roles" (Ruether 10). Moreover, because of the Church's longtime influence on the law and the judicial system, "the canon law admitted no other matrimonial regime then the dowry scheme, which made women legally incompetent and powerless...

The masculine occupations remain closed to her” (de Beauvoir 98). The very roots of the systems that govern society are faith-based and oppressive.

Because there is a stigma in place regarding women in the workplace, when Gregor’s sister Grete has to work in *The Metamorphosis*, it is depicted as a great tragedy. “And was his sister now supposed to work—who for all her seventeen years was still a child and whom it would be such a pity to deprive of the life she had led until now, which had consisted of wearing pretty clothes, sleeping late... and above all playing the violin?” (21). Women like Grete aren’t meant to take responsibility: they are caregivers for the family and nothing more. Kierkegaard dramatizes the Christian sentiment when it comes to women’s liberation:

I hate all that contemptible talk of the emancipation of women. God forbid it should ever happen. But it will not, it must not and cannot. Let evil spirits try it, let stupid people who have no idea of what it is to be man... no inkling of woman’s perfection in her imperfection! Could there really be one single woman simple-minded... and vain enough to believe that within the category of man, she could be more perfect than man? 577.

Kierkegaard’s fervent denial of woman’s rights leaves women with few choices as to how to spend her time or what she should strive for. Thus, characters like Grete remain stuck at home, purposeless and lonely, while their male counterparts are free to go and come as they please, all because of the patriarchy facilitated by Christianity. Moreover, even when Gregor’s death leaves Grete without the responsibility of homemaking, her parents continue to see her as merely an object. “It occurred almost simultaneously to Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, as they watched their daughter getting livelier and livelier, that lately, in spite of all the troubles... she had blossomed into a good looking and shapely girl... They thought that it would soon be time... to find her a good husband” (Kafka 42). The brief liberation that Gregor’s death brought Grete is immediately revoked as her parents again see her only in terms of her relation to men. The shift in power that occurs in the novella, from Gregor to Grete, can only come because of Gregor’s destruction. Thus, it is not an example of empowerment but rather an issue of objectification. “Only

when Grete blooms into an eligible young woman, ripe for the job and marriage markets, can we recognize that her empowerment is also an ironic reification. She has been transformed at another's expense, and she will carry within her the marketplace value that has ultimately destroyed Gregor, a value that may destroy her as well" (Straus 658). Grete evolves not into an independent woman but instead into "a little patriarch": her new role in the family actually only furthers the male-dominated society she lives in as her parents push her back into the world "as a woman who has learned to exploit (or be exploited by) the system" (Straus 666). The Samsa families' haste to reenter the capitalist system will destroy their daughter Grete. Because Christianity dictates that she cannot ever truly live independently of man (as explained by Kierkegaard), her contributions to this male-dominated society will only further her oppression. Anything she does will only strengthen the system that hurts her.

In *Steppenwolf*, **Hermine** also feels pressure to play the role man has dictated for her. When reflecting upon her life, she speaks not of what she could have accomplished but what the men around her could have been capable of. "I was meant to live up to a high standard, to expect much of myself and do great things. I could have played a great part. I could have been the wife of a king, the beloved of a revolutionary, the sister of a genius, the mother of a martyr" (Hesse 150). Hermine can only visualize herself in roles defined by men, as a society dominated by theology leaves her with few alternatives. Like Grete, her attempts to live independently in society render her helpless: the society she sees encourages her not to embrace her independence but instead to remain dependent on men for her self-definition.

When Kierkegaard is used to examine existential texts like *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, *The Metamorphosis* and *Steppenwolf*, the influence that religious standards for women had on these pieces becomes quite apparent. In order to further contextualize the stories, one must employ feminist writers to balance Kierkegaard's blatant misogyny, as without an understanding as to where his ideas are based and what effects they tend to have on women, his words are offensive but have no further implications.



Once this balance is achieved, the influence that Christianity holds on both the character's lives and the author's choices becomes clear. Maria, Grete, Praskovya and Hermine all struggle to balance their female roles with their own identities and desires while surrounded by a faith-based society in which feminism and female empowerment is discouraged. Even today, conservative, faith-based politics continue to dictate what women can or cannot do: the near lack of reproductive freedom effectively restricts women's sexuality by forcing them to live in fear of unintended pregnancies (the large majority of United States counties are without abortion clinics). Christianity's effects on women's livelihood, as evidenced in existentialist works, will continue so long as the religion remains prevalent and largely without feminist criticism.



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