

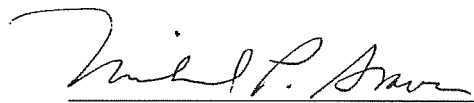
God with the Backwards Wave:
A Text In Context Analysis of the Characterization of God in Joan of Arcadia


Presented to the Faculty
Liberty University
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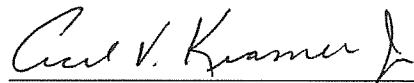
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Abstract

God is a television star. In Barbara Hall's Joan of Arcadia, which aired on CBS from 2003-2005, teenaged Joan Girardi, played by Amber Tamblyn, has conversations with God on a weekly basis. Rather than appearing in bright lights amidst angelic voices and special effects, God speaks to Joan through a variety of human guises, both male and female. The characterization of God in Joan of Arcadia is, arguably, the most extensive portrayal of God in American television, as nearly ninety actors play the deity over the show's two-season run. Understanding the creative team's portrayal of God as a character is significant to any studies relating spiritual ideals and film. Therefore, this thesis follows text in context studies through a close reading of Joan of Arcadia, specifically tracing Joan's interactions with four principal recurring God characters: Cute Boy God, Little Girl God, Old Lady God and Goth Kid God. Synthesizing the characteristics of these four God characters may give insight into the nature of the overall God of Joan of Arcadia. Paul Schrader's model of transcendental style in film and John Dominic Crossan's theological definitions of myth and parable are two additional tools which aid in analyzing this groundbreaking broadcast representation of God.

Keywords:

God, Joan of Arcadia, Barbara Hall, Transcendental Style, Paul Schrader, Television, John Dominic Crossan, Jeanne d'Arc

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Finally, I would like to thank the creator of Joan of Arcadia, Barbara Hall, for giving me more than just an interesting text to study. Her series enriches my life by inspiring dialogue with others that deepens my understanding of God. I thank her for her creativity, ambition, and commitment in creating such a quality series with characters that ask such important questions.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to two of the most creative people I know, my parents, Kevin Lee and Pamela Jean Kennedy. Their words encourage, but their lives inspire.

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Chapter One: Groundwork and Review of Literature

Introduction

In the fall of 2003, a strange phenomenon began. God showed up on CBS every Friday night, and millions of people watched. Barbara Hall's Joan of Arcadia (referred to as *JOA* in this study) became a surprise hit drama in its first season run on CBS.

Reviewers began making God quips and advertisers began competing for commercial spots on the highly-rated show. The synopsis for the show from <www.cbs.com> reads, "Unsure of what God wants—if God exists—and if she's even sane, Joan tentatively follows God's cryptic directives, all the while trying to retain a normal teenaged existence."

Shortly after the Girardi family moves to Arcadia—where father Will, played by Joe Mantegna, begins his job as the Chief of Police—teenaged Joan, played by Amber Tamblyn, starts hearing voices. The pilot episode begins with Joan's uneasy night of sleep because of someone calling her name. A few minutes into the episode, though, God has a face. The only problem is, as viewers quickly learn, that God's face always changes. In the first episode alone, God takes the form of a voice, an old man in Joan's backyard, a cute boy on the bus that receives Joan's smiling attention, and a cafeteria lunch lady with a hairnet. God begins telling Joan to perform a variety of tasks with little or no questions answered, unless answering her questions with more questions.

Some of the subplots involving Will's crime cases are sometimes related to Joan's adventures with God. Joan's mother, Helen, played by Mary Steenburgen, is an art teacher at her school, and Joan's brother Luke, played by Michael Welch, is a 16-year-old self-proclaimed "man of science." Creating significant dramatic tension is Joan's

older brother and former star athlete, Kevin, played by Jason Ritter, who is confined to a wheelchair after a car accident. Several plotlines feature Kevin's readjustments to daily living.

The show about a girl who talks to God received much critical acclaim in its opening season, in addition to strong ratings on Fridays, a traditionally weak night of programming with fewer viewers. Plus, Tamblyn was nominated for both a Golden Globe and an Emmy award for the first season of *JOA*, and the show itself was nominated for the Emmy for outstanding drama series. The show won the People's Choice Award for favorite new television drama during the same season, as well as the Humanitas Prize, a Family Television Award, and was named one of AFI Awards' Top 10 Television Series.

So, who is the God that receives all of this attention? *JOA* is not the first television program to feature storylines driven by God. Touched by an Angel was a huge success for CBS from 1994-2003, but *JOA* is different. Instead of angels, God himself constantly manifests His presence in new human forms. He also does not answer questions. Considering *JOA*'s unique portrayal of deity along with the show's surprising success in its freshman season, the relationship between God and Joan in Barbara Hall's Joan of Arcadia is ripe for analysis. My study seeks to understand the character of God presented in the series by conducting a close reading of the text in its context, as it applies to recurring God characters, with the added consultation of supporting theories when appropriate. The study begins with a review of pertinent literature.

Review of Literature

JOA completed its second full season on the air in May of 2005. While it is a program that has been extensively discussed and reviewed in popular media, it is still too soon for it to have received much significant analysis from the academic community. Therefore, my review of literature will draw from a variety of sources, including directly-related popular sources and indirectly-related scholarly works. Popular media will be the starting point, since *JOA* is a product of popular media in the first place.

Popular Media Coverage

Once the fall 2003 television season was underway, it did not take long for industry insiders to recognize *JOA* as a hit. The cover of the January 24, 2004 issue of TV Guide read, "God and TV: Joan of Arcadia Talks to the Almighty and Her Ratings Soar." Inside, several articles focused on the spiritually-themed hit. Mark Nollinger's article, "TV Goes with God," used *JOA* as a starting point to discuss a new thematic trend toward spirituality in primetime television. He explains, "What sets the new breed of spiritually themed programs apart is a more daring, thoughtful, and sophisticated approach to issues of God, faith, and the afterlife. Ambiguity is in. Sentimentality and wish fulfillment are out" (44). Nollinger outlines the ambiguity and questioning approach of five shows, including *JOA*. He cites Robert J. Thompson, director of Syracuse University's Center for the Study of Popular Television as saying, "On Joan of Arcadia, there's a character in a wheelchair who doesn't get to walk again. If that guy was on Highway to Heaven, by the end of the episode he'd be doing a jig" (44). This article outlines the significant departure that *JOA* seems to take from previous religious-based programming, such as Touched by An Angel. "Even the more orthodox God

depicted on Joan of Arcadia is pretty open-minded, telling Joan that it's not about religion. It's about fulfilling your true nature" (44). Its looser ties to organized religion, according to this author, may be one reason the show was successful at the time of the magazine's publication. This source is more significant than earlier reviews because it was published nearly halfway into the run of the first season, which means initial reactions were over, as audiences and critics were digesting the show's themes on a regular basis.

Aside from reviews from popular critics, another gift toward understanding God and Joan's relationship comes in the form of interviews with the show's creator, Barbara Hall. In the same edition of TV Guide, Nollinger includes an accompanying article specifically about Hall's vision for the show, entitled "That's the Spirit." Nollinger explains how Hall was raised in the Methodist church but left Christianity as a college student. During a 1997 trip to New Orleans, Hall became the victim of a brutal rape. 'I nearly died,' says Hall. 'After that I understood that there is Something, and I just got busy trying to find whatever language I was going to use to communicate with whatever that was'" (48). This event led Hall to evaluate the tenets of several world religions. She eventually decided to convert to Catholicism. Now, her faith and questions about God are at the forefront of her productions. "Every time we type the word God, we break out in a cold sweat...It's huge," says Hall, laughing (48). This short interview points to the risk and excitement involved in such a high concept production.

Hall went into even more depth about her views of the show's spirituality as a guest on a segment of CNN People in the News called, "Religion in Entertainment." Paula Zahn hosted the program on March 26, 2005, in which cast-members Tamblyn,

Mantegna, and Steenburgen also participated. Zahn explains, “Her [Hall’s] inspiration [for the show] came from a long time interest in Joan of Arc and her own preteen daughter.” Hall recalls, “Just sort of looking at her and wondering what it would look like if she had, you know, had a calling like that. If any teenager would be able to answer a calling like that. And then it led to imagining what that would look like if God tried to talk to a teenager today...” Zahn’s questions present both Hall and *JOA* in a positive light, while allowing the creator to explain her intentions more thoroughly.

“Hall says, ‘God is a subject that almost no one is indifferent to. Everyone has an opinion on it. Everybody wants to be in the discussion. That original plan for coming up with Joan of Arcadia was to engage people in the discussion’” (CNN). She portrays it as a springboard for spiritual discussions without pretense. Following suit, Steenburgen says, “The show doesn’t try to preach to anyone. It doesn’t try to pretend to have really any of the answers, not just all the answers, but even any of the answers, but it is a show that’s not afraid to ask people questions.” Throughout the program the cast-members express appreciation for the way in which the scripts treat spiritual issues with openness.

One way the show sparks conversations is by portraying God in a different human form each week. Hall explains, “The reason is to keep God from being stereotyped or defined as a human being. And also to keep him/her surprising. Therefore, the God of the show is everywhere and nowhere. Always around, but – always surprising.” This portion of the interview not only helps to explain the various portrayals of God, but it also gives insight into the Hall’s own theology. Ultimately, the ever-changing likeness of the deity causes both Joan and viewers to question how they may relate to God. “Joan sort of treats God like her friend. Sometimes she hates him. She makes fun of him.

Actually makes fun of God a lot. It's a love/hate relationship, but it's cool," says Tamblyn. These and other observations from the CNN broadcast offer insight into the ways in which those directly related to the show view the relationship between God and Joan.

Religious Media Views

Given the spiritual theme of *JOA*, it should come as no surprise that religious media outlets and publications have given the show significant coverage and analysis. These sources add another facet to understanding the God/Joan dynamic. National Catholic Reporter contributor, Paula Doyle, also caught up with Hall for an interview. Hall explains, "I wanted the series to be as dark as life is. The show is mainly about questions, not answers" (6). Hall's rhetoric is similar to previous reports, but she goes further, explaining the organized religion angle. "'It's not going to happen that we do a show about God and not mention religion,' said Hall, who stood her ground with industry executives wanting a religion-free show" (6). Hall believes the show's success is due in part to the unpredictability of how God will be portrayed each week to the viewers. Hall is also proud of the show's thematic spontaneity. "The main thing people like is it's not what they thought it would be," said Hall (6). This is also the reason the show is a conversation piece in religious publications and circles.

One primary discussion point seems to be the fact that Joan is not overtly religious. In his article, "Hip Mission" for Christianity Today, Douglas LeBlanc writes, "Though Joan sometimes wanders into an empty church, her family has not yet worshipped together and doesn't seem to know any Christians to whom church means anything. Joan simply attracts God's guidance day after day – maybe because she listens

and, even after resisting his most perplexing orders...she eventually obeys" (101). The views of Christianity Today are telling for this program because of the magazine's ties to the conservative evangelical market. LeBlanc concludes, "Joan of Arcadia is not a source of systematic theology, or course, even at a popular level...but as an effort to move spiritual TV shows beyond tear-jerking resolutions and angels who deliver lengthy speeches, it works. May Barbara Hall live long and remain prolific" (102). It is significant to note the overall positive response to the show, even despite some minor misgivings, that LeBlanc proclaims in this niche periodical because it may shed light on how other Christians view the program, specifically when it comes to considering how Joan's view of God may or may not differ from American evangelical views of God.

Joan's fictitious family is made up of backslidden Catholics, and it seems that Catholic publications have given the show the most coverage of any of the religious media. In his article for U.S. Catholic, "In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Cafeteria Worker," Patrick McCormick writes, "Joan's God, however, is no burning bush...There are no special effects warning Joan or the audience that we are dealing with more than an ordinary stranger" (47). McCormick discusses several implications of portraying God in ordinary human form, as opposed to some fanciful cinematic rendering. He continues, "Having God appear in so many different forms also provides a nice tonic against idolatry. If Joan sees God differently each time, she can't get attached to one image or notion of the divine, she can't forget that God is beyond all our images and notions, a mystery we can point to but never name" (47). McCormick's point about idolatry is unique among the literature I have consulted thus far. This appraisal may offer a point of departure for analysis of the first season's programs.

Academic Interpretations of *JOA*

While much scholarly work specifically concerning Joan of Arcadia is yet to appear in print, there are a few sources currently available that offer scholarly insight into the program beyond the popular and religious sources already mentioned. In her article, “Faith-Based Plot Initiatives” for the online journal Flow, Mimi White offers several unique suggestions to understanding the God of *JOA*. First, she calls God “an inverse deus ex machina, where God shows up at the start to get things going, instead of appearing in the nick of time to resolve dilemmas.” This is a plot-driven, practical interpretation. White adds, “Joan’s God (Gods?) seems to derive from some sort of multicultural Judeo-Christian tradition, broadly speaking, embodied in humans of varying races, genders, and age...This is also God without a specific religion...God(s) starts verging upon New Age spiritualism as some kind of diffuse power, existing in everyone, or some sort of higher ethical consciousness.” This interpretation is also unique compared to the rest of my research. Such analyses can aid my viewing and interpretation of the show’s two seasons with other potential lenses through which to view Joan’s God. White closes her article by pointing out how *JOA* draws from several views of God to arrive at God’s characterization and storylines. She also poses the question of God being a metaphor.

Another interesting and surprising find from academia was a formal research paper posted to the fan website <www.joanofarcadia.com>. “Potential v. Kinetic: The Arcadia Quandary” was written by Marie L. Maurer and seeks to discover why the ratings for *JOA* have fallen so drastically from the first season to the second. Maurer studies both Nielsen ratings and the airing and content of promotional spots. She also

looks at the situation through Muted Group Theory and speculates about the moral viewership of the show. She even incorporates a heuristic approach to studying audience share. I have chosen to take my study in a different direction than Maurer. I will be focusing more on the content than on the response of the audience, so Maurer's research will not directly influence the content of my study. However, Maurer's paper may serve as a useful example of both helpful and harmful approaches to such a current and understudied program.

Further searching located another academic paper specifically analyzing *JOA*. Kevin S. Trowbridge, a graduate student from Regent University, presented his paper, "Depicting God as 'One of Us': An Ideological Criticism of Joan of Arcadia," at Campbell University's Second Annual Conference on Faith and Communication. In the paper, Trowbridge conducts a rhetorical analysis of the broad religious messages of the series in order to postulate the intents and purposes of series creator Barbara Hall. Trowbridge consults several sources on religion and film and compares *JOA* to several television programs to highlight its unique features. Trowbridge concludes by analyzing portions of text containing dialogue between Joan and God from both the pilot episode and the finale of season one. Trowbridge's study acts as a foundational reference for the more specific analyses presented in this study. Many of his conclusions deal with the show as a whole, but this study will focus on the God character specifically.

Catholic author and editorialist, Andrew M. Greeley, has turned his attention to the portrayals of God in *JOA*, in particular, in two articles that are pertinent to this study. First, in "The God of 'Joan' Works in Mysterious Ways," Greeley writes, "The God of Joan of Arcadia, like the God of Joan of Arc, is unpredictable, unfathomable and, as the

professional theologians love to say it, ineffable. He does not explain nor apologize... Most Americans are like Joan. They don't think that this kind of god is fair. God should offer explanations and answer questions, instead of slipping away as Joan's God does with a casual wave of the hand" (11). Greeley directly compares the God of Joan of Arcadia to the representation of God in the Joan of Arc legend. Surprisingly, he is the first to make this connection among the other authors listed. Greeley also notes the difference between legendary Joan and primetime Joan. Primetime Joan wrestles with God, just like her audience does. Greeley also offers a potentially heuristic point of further departure when he describes the God of *JOA* as "the hidden God." He writes, "Ms. Hall is not the first theologian to understand that we are dealing with a hidden God. Kevin Smith, in his film *Dogma*, presented the same image of God. Both Smith and Hall are part of the same tradition of theology and it dates back to Augustine" (11). Such potential connections between St. Augustine and filmmaker Kevin Smith may prove helpful in future studies of the *JOA* text.

Greeley's second article analyzing *JOA* focuses on God as one who haunts and pursues. In "Is God One of Us?: The Many Voices of God in 'Joan of Arcadia,'" Greeley states, "The series lacks denominational affiliation – biased only in favor of those of us who believe that God lurks everywhere, pursuing us, haunting us, loving us, begging us, giving us hints that are sometimes like a spring zephyr and sometimes like a whirlwind" (15). His approach in the article is more editorial in nature, but his point is still appropriate to this study. He concludes by saying, "The stories themselves are metaphors, fables, sacraments. God rarely speaks to any of us directly, the way he does to Joan. But it does not follow that we do not hear similar messages from the people and

experiences of our life. Ms. Hall's fables remind us to be alert for such experiences" (15). Greeley's belief that *JOA*'s plotlines are related to sacrament or fable actually echoes other research I have found. His article is the last article of significance I found directly discussing the God of *JOA*, and it relates to further research.

Finally, the most recent article to specifically analyze *JOA* appeared in the Journal of Media and Religion. Lisa M. Elliott of Bowling Green State University offers the most detailed analysis of *JOA* thus far published in her article, "Transcendental Television? A Discussion of Joan of Arcadia." She deals with *JOA* in light of Paul Schrader's transcendental style, which this study explains in greater detail in succeeding pages, and auteur theory. She also carefully outlines the social contexts under which the show was written, purchased by CBS, aired, and received by audiences. Context is foundational to Elliott's study. While Schrader's work is usually applied to film texts, Elliott believes it is more than appropriate for television. She says:

This serial format [of television] and ongoing disparity allows for a powerful opportunity...Although Joan of Arcadia does have conventional resolutions each week, it is still able to maintain a degree of stasis by returning to the everyday at the end of each episode and by not fully explaining everything. (8)

She is the first scholar I have found to look for evidence of transcendental style, as defined by Schrader, specifically in *JOA*. While Elliott's article was published midway through my study, it still greatly enhanced my own understanding of transcendental style in television. Her appreciation for the serial nature of television, allowing for weekly moments of transcendence positively influences perception in this particular study.

While Elliott uses transcendental style to inform her understanding of the series as a whole, this study will use it to inform understanding of the God character, specifically.

Theology and Film

The next layer of consulted literature includes sources specifically critiquing film through the eyes of theology. John Dominic Crossan is widely known for his work with the historical study of Jesus, including several books about Jesus of Nazareth and work with The Jesus Seminar. However, his scholarship also includes the study of narrative, as he seeks to define myths and parables through theological terms. In the third chapter of The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story, Crossan details the tradition of the parable. The parable “subverts” the world, whereas the myth, as defined by Crossan, “establishes” the world. He believes some texts are simply “myths that confirm their [the reader/ audience’s] outlook on life” (40). However, some film texts can transcend and minister like parables to the audience. Crossan’s distinction between myth and parable may prove important to understanding a groundbreaking work, such as *JOA*. The God of a myth is very different from the God of a parable, and it remains to be seen whether *JOA* is a myth, a parable, or both. This line of analysis can be useful in understanding the analyses of the two seasons.

In Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue, Robert K. Johnston offers a continuum of responses the church has commonly made to film. “Since the invention of motion pictures a century ago, one can observe five differing theological responses that the church has made to film as it has learned from and has sought to influence Hollywood...we labeled these avoidance, caution, dialogue, appropriation, and divine encounter” (41). Johnston goes in to detail about the nature of each of these five

responses. Multiple responses may be helpful in better understanding *JOA*. Based on previous research, especially interviews with the show's creator, Barbara Hall, preliminary evaluation suggests that the dialogue response is a priority of the show. Johnston continues, "In fact, I argue that the nature of both moviegoing and religious faith demands that filmviewing be completed from a theological perspective. But such theologizing should follow, not precede, the aesthetic experience" (49-50). He promotes viewing a film first to see what it has to say before appropriating theological interpretations.

Johnston offers the following set of arguments encouraging Christians to enter into dialogue with film:

- (1) God's common grace is present throughout human culture.
- (2) Theology should be concerned with the Spirit's presence and work in the world.
- (3) God is active within the wider culture and speaks to us through all of life.
- (4) Image as well as word can help us to encounter God.
- (5) Theology's narrative shape makes it particularly open to interaction with other stories.
- And (6) the nature of constructive theology is a dialogue between God's story (Bible, Christian tradition, and a particular worshiping community) and our stories (the surrounding culture and life experiences).

Several of these arguments may be directly applied to entering into dialogue with *JOA* to better understand it from a theological perspective. *JOA* illustrates arguments 1-3, as God is present in Joan's world and speaks through all of life, including the culture. Argument 4 is also related, as Joan's image of God changes from week to week, and that

image must say something about Joan's God, just like God's words. Arguments 5-6 echo back to Hall and Greeley, as both of them mentioned Joan's stories complementing stories of the viewers. There is also potential for Joan's stories to interact with scripture on some level. It is important to note that Johnston is a Christian who writes his guidelines to fellow Christians. His background influences his arguments, but that does not mean they are exclusively appropriate to the studies of Christians. They may be consulted and considered by any scholar trying to make theological connections to the text of *JOA*.

While Johnston encourages dialogue and Greeley and Hall laud *JOA*'s ability to incite it, Francis A. Schaefer places an important standard on the appropriateness of the vehicle to achieve the goals of its content. Schaefer's seminal work on the relationships of faith in art, Art and the Bible, also offers insight into analyzing *JOA*. Schaefer evaluates art on the four basic standards of technical excellence, validity, intellectual content (the worldview that comes through), and the integration of content and vehicle. He writes, "The fourth criterion for judging a work of art involves how well the artist has suited the vehicle to the message. For those works of art that are truly great, there is a correlation between the style and the content. The greatest art fits the vehicle that is being used to the world view that is being presented" (46-47). This final criterion will be important to keep in mind when evaluating the dialogical effectiveness of *JOA*. If television is the proper medium for inciting dialogue due to its serial nature, as suggested by previous research, then it is appropriate to evaluate the specific execution of the show to see if the content matches the vehicle for this purpose.

Searching through the Dissertation Abstracts International database yielded a reference to Peter Joseph Fraser's dissertation, The Sacramental Mode in Film. Fraser explains:

Sacramental films follow two traditional Christian liturgical patterns. The first type follows Western liturgical attitudes that develop a reenactment of Christ's passion and God's transcendent silence. The incarnational moment in such films occurs within an individual and is cued by indexical, metonymic cues...The second type follows Eastern liturgical attitudes that develop a conception of God as everywhere present and man as a potential icon of the incarnate God. The films of Carl Dreyer and Andrey Tarkovsky are examples. (vii)

Based on my viewing of the pilot episode of *JOA*, as well as previous research, I anticipate *JOA* to follow an Eastern liturgical pattern since God may be represented by a man and is omnipresent. However, that does not mean that a Western liturgical pattern may not also have a presence in the series. Also, this is the first of three sources I found referencing the work of Carl Dreyer, which offers another beneficial research connection, when seeking to understand Joan's relationship to her multi-faced God.

The second source I found that references Dreyer is also the frequently referenced work on transcendence in film Elliott used in her study. In Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer, Paul Schrader defines "transcendental style" in film as "beyond normal sense experience, and...by definition, the immanent" (5). Schrader uses the works of Carl Dreyer, Yasujiro Ozu, and Robert Bresson to illustrate this transcendental style. Schrader states, "The proper function of transcendental art is,

therefore, to express the Holy itself (the Transcendent), and not to express or illustrate holy feelings” (7). He believes this is achieved through unembellished camerawork, acting that is not self-conscious, and sincere editing without extra comment. Schrader traces this style through time and culture to show the commonality between the three directors. Schrader’s model for transcendental style is marked by a representation of commonplace “everyday living” (39). This representation soon encounters a disparity or “an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action” (42). Following this action, the artist finishes the work with stasis or “a frozen view of life which does not resolve the disparity but transcends it” (49). Looking for the elements of the everyday, disparity, and stasis may inform understanding Joan’s interaction with the God of *JOA*. Schrader also details the differences and uses of “abundant means” and “sparse means” as they relate to transcendental style (154-155). He says:

These [abundant] means are sensual, emotional, humanistic, individualistic. They are characterized by soft lines, realistic portraiture, three-dimensionality, experimentation; they encourage empathy...The sparse means are cold, formalistic, hieratic. They are characterized by abstraction, stylized portraiture, two-dimensionality, rigidity; they encourage respect and appreciation (155).

Paying attention to the uses of each may also increase understanding in this study. Near the book’s end, Schrader states, “Transcendental style can bring us nearer to that silence, that invisible image, in which the parallel lines of religion and art meet and interpenetrate” (169). It will be interesting to see if *JOA* can achieve anything similar to

Schrader's transcendental style. The show seems poised for transcendence when it comes to content, according to previous citations, but analyzing the visuals and acting, in addition to the dialogue, must come into play in order to fall in line with Schrader's ideals.

Portrayals of Joan of Arc

The third source referencing Carl Dreyer is one of two articles I found that analyze popular representation of the legendary Joan of Arc. Bill Scalia compares two cinematic portrayals of St. Joan in his article, "Contrasting Visions of a Saint: Carl Dreyer's The Passion of Joan of Arc and Luc Besson's The Messenger." Screening these two films may also enhance understanding of Barbara Hall's take on Joan. Dreyer's film is a famed piece of silent cinema from 1928, while Besson's film is a full-scale epic from 1999. Scalia explains, "Besson is intent on making an epic visual spectacle, and demonstrates Joan's 'voices' with elaborate special effects sequences. But special effects do not evoke the spiritual qualities of the cinema, and in this case hardly contribute to a sense of the ephemeral" (184). By contrast, Dreyer's film is much more simple and focused. "Hence Dreyer marries form and content – in his The Passion of Joan of Arc, the two are both perfectly complementary and inseparable" (185). Like Schrader, Scalia notes the transcendent quality of Dreyer's film. This is another significant connection between sources. Scalia's article also hints at the different representations of God in the films. Besson's Joan is seemingly driven by psychological voices of revenge, whereas Dreyer's film portrays Joan more akin to legend. Dreyer's Joan is not going crazy. The fact that Besson's portrayal of God is named "The Conscience" also, arguably, takes the divinity out of the portrayal.

Long before these cinematic depictions, though, Joan of Arc made her debut on the American speaking circuit. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell outlines this portrayal of Joan in her article, "La Pucelle D'Orleans Becomes an American Girl: Anna Dickinson's 'Jeanne D'Arc.'" This article is significant as, arguably, one of the only rhetorical studies of Joan of Arc to come out of the field of communication. Campbell begins her article with examples of the many ways Joan's story has been represented, or misrepresented, in dozens of formats by people with a variety of agendas. The popular speaker and female reformer, Anna Dickinson, is the subject of Campbell's scrutiny, as Dickinson built a speech around an Americanized version of Joan in order to promote woman's rights. Campbell explains, "...Dickinson's Joan was a real ordinary person, not a legend, a saint, or a creature of blind fate...Spiritually, Catholic Joan was shown to be a Protestant. Finally, Dickinson's Joan triumphed in death, giving her life for her country; she was not a threatening, troubling "amazon," but a "true woman," that is, pure, pious, domestic, and submissive" (101). This new icon for the woman's rights movement was not simply Americanized. She was fundamentally different from the legend, but the people of the age could relate to her. Campbell charges Dickinson with exploitation. Barbara Hall's character of Joan is drawn so that a majority of viewers can relate to her. She is ordinary, non-religious, and questioning. One wonders if Campbell would consider Hall's work exploitative. Either way, both Hall and Dickinson crafted characters that audiences could identify with and somewhat understand.

God in Film and Pop Culture

While Hall's representation of Joan is easy to comprehend, her representations of God are more complex, as they are ever-changing. Fortunately, there is a wealth of

literature concerning representations of God in film with several examples from which one can draw comparisons to God in *JOA*. In “The Uses of Film in Theology,” David John Graham claims, “In other ways, more cerebral than emotive, film can also be an important medium for shaping or questioning theology” (36). Graham aligns himself with other proponents of placing theology and film in dialogue. He also discusses the idea of God being represented in anything. To clarify, he states, “What we are discussing here is not the view that God is to be found in everything (sometimes called pantheism), but the idea that the experience of God can be transmitted through anything” (37). Graham’s article serves as a springboard for following articles detailing specific views of God in various films in the anthology, Explorations in Theology and Film.

Another article from the same anthology compares twelve filmic versions of Jesus, as well as several Christ-figures from other films. William R. Telford’s book, “Jesus Christ Movie Star: The Depiction of Jesus in the Cinema,” is both focused and extensive enough for an adequate introduction to Christological studies in film. He starts with silent-era Christ-figures and traces them all the way through the 1990’s, when the anthology was published. Another interesting appraisal of the pop culture Christ-figure is Stephen Prothero’s, American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon. Prothero begins his study of the American view of Jesus with the controversial musings of Thomas Jefferson. Prothero delves deep into a variety of views of Christ held by a range of sub-groups in American culture. While these two sources offer detailed information, it remains to be seen how useful they may be to this study, as *JOA* does not necessarily portray Jesus, and Jesus is already understood in human form, unlike filmic portrayals of God. Still, they are useful as studies of deity portrayed on film.

Further work of Andrew Greeley may be applied to this portion of the study, as he analyzes representations of God the Father in several films. In, "A God Who Plays it by Ear: Five Metaphors for God in Recent Films," Greeley contrasts portrayals of God in Oh, God!, All That Jazz, Always, Mr. Destiny, and Jacob's Ladder. Greeley summarizes by saying, "In all five films, God is attractive; sympathetic; dialogue-oriented; flexible – one might say infinitely flexible; concerned with consent rather than the working of wonders; and eager to persuade the protagonist to 'let go,' to find life by losing it" (67). Whether these attributes exist in the God of *JOA* or not, they may serve as contrasting examples of portraits of God in film. Greeley later expanded his study of God-figures and teamed with Albert J. Bergesen to write God in the Movies. New films to receive scrutiny include Flatliners, Pale Rider, Ghost, Field of Dreams, and others. All of these analyses may be useful in understanding Hall's portrayals of God in *JOA*.

Another invaluable resource includes a near-exhaustive list of sources connecting religion and film. Terry Lindvall's two-part contribution to Communication Research Trends, "Religion and Film: History and Criticism," serves as a detailed annotated bibliography linking scholars to a variety of sources. Foundational studies under the general heading of religion and film may prove useful for better understanding this and subsequent studies.

The popular media articles, interviews, religious critiques, and scholarly works will all be beneficial. However, the most important resource for this study is the show itself, and transcripts of each episode are available for educational purposes online at the television transcript website, <www.twiztv.com>.

Significance of Study

Studying the character of God in *JOA* is more important than a standard character study. The portrayal of God as a character in a television series or film is rare. The entertainment properties that include God as a character are limited, and the majority of these stories only show God in one guise. *JOA* is a groundbreaking series in many ways. The Simpsons may include God as a recurring character, but *JOA* makes God a series regular¹. Touched By an Angel and Highway to Heaven followed the adventures of angels on a weekly basis, but God himself was not a character. Media can help shape people's perceptions of God. Several factors contribute to this, including such trends as society becoming increasingly mediated, parents staying home with children less, and church attendance declining. Therefore, it is important to try to understand the character of God that is presented through popular culture. *JOA* tried things other series have avoided. It functions as a multi-layered family drama with family storylines, police storylines, and the added element of spiritual questioning through Joan's interactions with God. It is a milestone for spiritual dialogue in popular culture and is, therefore, worthy of study.

Methodology

After reviewing a wealth of resources, I turn to viewing and analyzing the entire two seasons of *JOA* in an attempt to understand and explain the vision of God that Barbara Hall desires to share with her audience. I want to grasp the relationship between

¹ For further investigation of the role of God in The Simpsons, see Mark I. Pinsky's The Gospel According to The Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

God and Joan that Hall has created. I have several tools from my review of literature which will benefit me in approaching the question, “Who is the God of *JOA*?”

James Andrews, Michael Leff, and Robert Terrill define rhetorical criticism as “the systematic process of illuminating products of human activity” (6). Under this broad definition, I seek to illuminate an understanding of the character of God in *JOA* through rhetorical criticism. Specifically, I choose to analyze the text of *JOA* to identify meaning. Following the line of “text in context rhetorical criticism,” which is related to Moya Ball’s “grounded theory” and what Martin Medhurst and Dilip Gaonkar refer to as the “theory of the particular case,” I will conduct a close reading of the text of *JOA*. I choose this method in part because of its relation to the model of transcendental style, which I also will appropriate. After all, Schrader says, “The ‘spiritual universality’ of transcendental style. . . can only be demonstrated by critics. At this point everyone must return to the evidence; one must analyze the films, scenes, and frames, hoping to extract the universal from the particular” (3). Schrader prefers an inductive approach to incorporating his model. I also choose this method because I contend that *JOA* is itself a particular case, unlike any other television show in that it features God as a principal character in multiple guises on a weekly basis.

In his article, “Close Reading,” in Sourcebook on Rhetoric: Key Concepts in Contemporary Rhetorical Studies, James Jasinski writes:

The principle object of close reading is to unpack the text. . . The close reader seeks to describe in detail how purpose is realized (at times subconsciously) in particular textual forms and strategies and how these

forms and strategies negotiate the various elements in the rhetorical situation. . . . (93)

Therefore, I look for nuances and connections within the text, allowing it to speak for itself. This can be applied to both the verbal text and the visual text, as I focus on individual scenes. As Jasinski notes, rhetorical details may be realized or subconscious, and both should be considered. This is especially advisable because the text is intended for an audience, and that audience can reason meaning from both planned and unplanned details.

I choose to isolate each particular scene between select God characters and Joan to focus on detail. This is in the spirit of Stephen Lucas, who says, “The benefit of close textual analysis is that it allows the critic, in essence, to ‘slow down’ the action within the text” (“The Renaissance of American Public Address: Text and Context in Rhetorical Criticism” 249). Since more than eighty-five different actors portray a God character over the two seasons of the series, I limit my research to recurring God characters. After comparing screen time between recurring God characters, I narrow the study to four principal God characters: Cute Boy God, Little Girl God, Old Lady God, and Goth Kid God. The names of the characters are their credited names. Although these names are never used in the dialogue of the show, they are found in production credits and writings about the program. Each of the four principal recurring God characters appear in eight episodes over the span of two seasons, except Cute Boy God and Goth Kid God, who both appear in nine. In his dissertation, Paul Creasman writes, “[discourse is] locked in time but also informed by it” (19). With this in mind, I trace Joan’s relationship to each

God character chronologically throughout the series, by conducting a close reading of scenes between Joan and the God character in order of episode airdates.

After completing my four chronological close readings of the texts by character, I can draw conclusions about the overall nature of the unified character of the God of *JOA*. Theories and concepts from scholars of spiritually themed rhetoric may inform my comparisons. From viewing the entire series and reading and analyzing the text of each scene with a principal recurring God character, I determine whether the show contains elements of John Dominic Crossan's myth, parable, or both. The God of a myth is different from the God of a parable. They operate and interact with the world differently, and I want to discover which construct the God in *JOA* resides within. To discover this, I analyze the construct of Hall's world, as well as the characterization of Joan's God.

Next, I approach the series through the lens of Paul Schrader's definition of transcendental style in film. This analysis brings the visual and acting aspects of the show into sharper focus, in addition to the dialogue, and scrutinizes how well these elements support the transcendental style. I compare the series' use of sparse means and abundant means and evaluate how they contribute to any possible transcendent scenes between Joan and a God character. As I conduct my close reading and viewing of the series, I look for Schrader's three clues to transcendental style: commonplace, disparity, and stasis. I note the use of transcendental style as it appears by character.

As an addendum, I evaluate how Joan interacts with God to better understand their relationship and its implications. After interacting with the character of Joan Girardi for two seasons' worth of episodes, I am better equipped to compare her to Joan of Arc. I can compare her to portrayals of Joan of Arc in the works of Luc Besson, Carl Dreyer,

and Anna Dickinson. Understanding Joan's character can aid in understanding God's character, since she is the one to whom he appears in the series.

Finally, my report of conclusions includes what can be derived as the unified nature of the God of *JOA*. It also includes suggestions for further study. This study is but one attempt to better understand the groundbreaking text that is *JOA*. It should be one of many inquiries into this important series. As well, it should add to the body of work that seeks to understand rhetorical texts that combine elements of religion in media.

Limitations of Study

While the study proves significant for several reasons, it is not without limitations. First of all, the study covers only four of the God characters. While these four characters recur in at least eight episodes apiece, with Cute Boy God appearing in nine, there are several other God characters that recur throughout the series. Had the series continued into a third season, as the producers had planned, it is possible that other God characters would have been elevated to the status of recurring role. An even more exhaustive study might evaluate each God character, whether the character recurs or not.

Secondly, the analyses are conducted from a single point of view. The study follows the path of "close reading" or "text in context" criticism, while using theory to inform analyses when appropriate. My point of view, as objective as attempted, is affected by certain biases. For example, I am a white middle class male with a high level of media literacy, and all of these factors somewhat affect my analysis. I also write as an evangelical Christian. Even though I maintain that the God of *JOA* is not necessarily the Christian God of the Bible, my background inevitably colors my point of view, especially my interpretation of the theological aspects of the series and study. Subsequent study of

JOA from the perspectives of people of other faiths, including agnosticism, may identify different insights from the texts used in this study.

Chapter Two: Cute Boy God

First Encounter: "Pilot"

The first remarkable trait of the representation of God in *Joan of Arcadia* (JOA) is that it is, on the surface, unremarkable. God does not show up in a ring of light amidst a host of angels with ethereal music, special effects, and oozing iridescence. No, the God of JOA comes in the commonplace. Just like the original Incarnation and consonant with the commonplace/disparity model of Schrader's transcendental style, Joan sees God in common human form. The first time she meets him, God is riding on the city bus a few rows behind Joan on the way to school. She seems to sense someone watching her and turns to find a cute boy pleasantly smiling in her direction. When they disembark the bus, the two begin talking. Before Cute Boy God, played by Kris Lemche, opens his mouth, though, the show's creators have already said a lot about him. First, it is significant that God is shown in human form; suggesting that Joan, and therefore the audience, can relate to him. God is shown as both relatable and similar to Joan. Second, God shows up as a teenager, just like Joan. Instead of being an elderly wise man, God comes in the form of a student intimately understanding of Joan's situation because of being directly connected to it. He goes to her school. He is a part of her high school world. Not only is God a teenager, but he is a teenage boy. The writers actually refer to him as Cute Boy God. This helps Joan like God in the first place. She appreciates his attention on the bus. Joan can be comfortable liking a 16-year-old boy. A 16-year-old boy is also easy for Joan to get upset with once the initial infatuation is over. Finally, it is important that God shows up as an average teenager. He is no more remarkable than any other teen, from neither a particularly high or low class. His clothes and demeanor make

him blend in. His smile and sincere eyes are the only qualities that set him apart. The particular representation of God has nonverbal significance to the portrayal of God, but his verbal messages are critical in establishing the conceit of the show as he is the first God character who interacts directly with Joan.

Joan's first conversation with Cute Boy God begins as welcome and common small talk. Joan wonders why she has not seen God at school before. He then replies, "I keep a low profile." This statement matches the relaxed mannerisms and casual attire mentioned above. After some light conversation, God suggests to Joan, "Let's walk this way." She declines and becomes slightly suspicious of him, as if he were just a boy trying to ask her out. Cute Boy God then confesses to seeing Joan outside of her house that morning, which harkens back to a harried opening scene in the pilot episode in which Joan sees a man looking up from the yard at her through her window before she leaves for school. Since the spying man was obviously older, Cute Boy God's confession perplexes Joan. He then explains, "Okay, this is the difficult part. I don't always look the same." Joan warns Cute Boy God about her father being a cop, which prompts this exchange:

Cute Boy God: I know who your father is, Joan. He is Will Girardi. Born September 4, 1955, Chicago. His father was Gerald Girardi. His mother was Alma Monroe. He had an uneventful childhood. Attended Mother Caprini High School and Morten Junior College. After that he joined the police force in 1980. Then he met your mother, one Helen Brodie. She was an art school drop out. You're the middle child of three. About a year and a half ago your older brother, Kevin, was in a car accident. Fractured

his back. Left him a paraplegic. You have one other brother, Luke, who's

15. Your favorite color is green. You love salt on Cantaloupe. Jim Das broke your heart in 8th grade. And, you're afraid of clowns.

Joan: Who are you?

Cute Boy God: I've known you since before you were born, Joan.

Joan: I'm going to ask you one more time.

Cute Boy God: I'm God.

Joan: You're what?

Cute Boy God: God.

Joan: Don't ever talk to me again.

After the dialogue Joan walks away; Cute Boy God watches her, and the pilot episode enters its first commercial break.

From this short scene of dialogue, the audience already understands several things about the God of *JOA* and his relationship to the protagonist. First of all, this God is omniscient. He knows all the intimate details of Joan's life. He not only recites family history to Joan, but he also knows her secret likes and fears. It is important to note that God is omniscient and intimate simultaneously. He is completely familiar with every detail of Joan's life. It is also important to consider the direction of the actor's delivery. Chris Lemche's delivery suggests two important motives behind his speech. First and at the surface, God is trying to prove he is who he says he is to the disbelieving Joan. Second, he shows that he cares about these details; you can see in Lemche's eyes that God felt sad for Joan's sadness when Jim Das broke her heart in the eighth grade. He also seems to identify, in part, with her fear of clowns. This God shows empathy with his

creation, Joan. He also affirms one Judeo-Christian belief that God knows individuals before they are born, which once again shows the character to be intimately connected to Joan. Joan's initial rejection does not seem to surprise or hurt this patient God character. He will wait for her until she is ready to acknowledge him.

In fact, he waits at school until Joan finally talks with him again after an incident in the principal's office. Now, Joan is less scared, and she seems ready to handle this cute but suspicious guy at school. Her second conversation with God is more candid and expository, as God reveals much about his character throughout the scene. Joan starts to question him:

Joan: Okay. So, you're God.

Cute Boy God: Yes.

Joan: As in, God.

Cute Boy God: Right.

Joan: Old Testament, Tower of Babel, burning bush, Ten Commandments, God.

Cute Boy God: I come off a little friendlier in the New Testament and the Koran, but, yeah, same God.

Joan: And, I'm supposed to believe you because?

Cute Boy God: Because you have a feeling.

Joan: No, I don't.

This clearly shows that the God of *JOA* is based on the Bible but left open to pluralism, which is marked by the inclusion of the Koran in this particular segment. The imagery draws mostly from Christianity but is not limited to it. The dialogue also reveals that the

God of *JOA* gives value to emotion. By linking belief to feeling, God suggests to Joan that logic may not be the first place to go for affirmation of faith. He could have merely repeated himself and continued telling Joan all of the secret things he knows about her to try and prove his case logically, but instead he prompts Joan to follow her instincts and trust his words as truth. His next proof does return to the logical line of defense, but it adds another dimension, as evidenced here:

Cute Boy God: How about you believe me if I agree to overlook that promise you didn't keep.

Joan: What promise?

Cute Boy God: Let' see. That you would study hard, stop talking back, clean your room, and even go to church, if I recall, if I let your brother live.

So, God once again reminds Joan he knows her private thoughts, but he also shows her that he was listening when she chose to talk to him. This exchange suggests that God is actively desiring and participating in a relationship with Joan. God overlooking Joan's negligence to her promise also suggests mercy and patience on his behalf. The scene continues:

Joan: How did you know about that?

Cute Boy God: Omniscient. Look it up.

Joan: So, you let my brother live, and now you're here to collect?

Cute Boy God: No, I don't bargain. That would be cruel.

God reaffirms his omniscience in this scene, while also poking sarcastic fun at Joan. Joan's assumption that God is here to collect on her promise is noteworthy because it

follows common human views of God. Viewers can probably identify with Joan's decision to plead and bargain with God, but God takes the opportunity to let her know that he does not work according to her assumptions. God affirms that he is not cruel, while simultaneously reiterating that his position is higher than that of man. This line of thought continues until Joan persists in asking questions. God tells her, "As a general rule, I ask the questions." This sets up the conceit that God will ask Joan questions to lead her to conclusions and actions. They continue:

Joan: Are you being snippy with me? God is snippy.

Cute Boy God: Let me explain something to you Joan. It goes like this: I don't look like this. I don't look like anything you'd recognize. You can't see me. I don't sound like this. I don't sound like anything you'd recognize. You see I'm beyond your experience. I take this form because you're comfortable with it. If I'm snippy it's because you understand snippy. Do you get it?

Joan: Sort of.

Cute Boy God: Good, because I'm really not snippy. I've got a great personality. You'd like me.

In just a few lines, Cute Boy God divulges some of the most important theological assumptions of the show. Up to this point, the pilot episode's portrayal of God has reinforced the idea that God is immanent, or interactively a part of the human world. The exchange adds another element of equal importance, transcendence. God explains that he is beyond Joan's natural capacities of experience. He chose this particular incarnation because it is one that Joan can directly understand.

Aside from theological propositions, this scene also explains to viewers how the characterization of God will work within the show's context. Viewers now know that God is a cute boy because Joan is comfortable interacting with such an individual. God also gives an excuse for his sarcasm, which may make him either more endearing or more palatable to viewers. We can accept a sarcastic God if he is using sarcasm to relate to Joan and not just to lord over her. The scene continues in laying further fundamental groundwork, as follows:

Joan: Uh, I'm not religious, you know.

Cute Boy God: It's not about religion, Joan. It's about fulfilling your true nature.

Joan: Oh, uh, I definitely haven't done that.

In these few words, God lets Joan and her viewers know that the show will not center on religion alone. This is not merely a line designed to relieve the viewing public from suspicion of religious agenda, however, because it connotes deeper application. The God of *JOA* presents and affirms the goal of Joan "fulfilling her true nature." This implies that Joan has a true nature to fulfill which God has definitive knowledge of. This suggests that God created Joan for a specific purpose, or at the very least, God knows the future, which includes Joan's fulfillment of her true nature. It is also important to note that God does not dismiss religion here. He simply places the emphasis on Joan becoming who she is meant to be. On a larger level, this also shows that the God of *JOA* holds to a grand scheme or unified plan involving individuals, one of whom is Joan.

The theological discussion continues throughout the scene covering new topics with traces of sarcasm from both Cute Boy God and Joan. For example:

Joan: Okay. Well, let's see a miracle.

Cute Boy God: [motioning to a tree] Okay. How about that?

Joan: That's a tree.

Cute Boy God: Let's see you make one.

Cute Boy God takes this opportunity to assert himself as the creator God. He also allows the general revelation of the created world to speak for him in this particular instance, instead of relying on specific isolated miracles. This does not negate the possibility of specific miracles in the future, but it places emphasis on the miraculous found in the everyday. This follows Schrader's model of transcendental cinema's use of sparse means, and it also points out how man can overlook the miracles of the natural created world.

This exchange transcends Joan's expectations, and the trend continues through further dialogue:

Joan: So, do you just go around, appearing to people?

Cute Boy God: Umm, a minor correction: I'm not appearing to you. You are seeing me.

In as much as she believes him, Joan views the conversations with God as specific and odd phenomena. Perhaps, this is an isolated moment of glorious appearing that Joan is party to? God dispels this perception, though. If God were appearing to Joan, instead of her merely seeing him, it could imply that God is somehow less involved in other lives. It could potentially limit his immanence throughout the entire world and also elevate Joan's particular individual significance if she were the only one God was "appearing" to. Joan seeing God, as opposed to God appearing to her, could also imply that God has been

involved in her life before without her acknowledging him. This also makes the viewer wonder who else God might be interacting with. This opens up hopeful possibility for God's involvement in the lives of other characters in the show, as well as proposing this possibility to viewers themselves.

The next portion of the conversation is critical to the set-up of the series. It continues:

Joan: Is it kind of weird that I have a crush on you?

Cute Boy God: I'm not going to look like this the next time.

Joan: The next time?

Cute Boy God: I'm going to be dropping in on you, Joan, now and then.

This exchange asserts that God will not appear as Cute Boy God next time, which leaves the show open to creative turns concerning the portrayal of God as a regular character. Joan also learns that God plans to visit her often.

The scene continues with God explaining that he will be asking Joan to "do some favors." He ignores Joan's questions of why and assigns Joan's first assignment. She is to get a job at the Skylight Bookstore without asking why. The conversation concludes:

Joan: And if I say no? Am I going to burst into flames?

Cute Boy God: Where do you people get this stuff? Have I ever made anybody burst into flames? Do as I ask. I'll see you around.

Joan: Wait, one more thing.

Cute Boy God: Soon, Joan. [He walks away with a backwards wave.]

Once again Cute Boy God answers Joan's question with another question. He dismisses the notion of bursting into flames as a bogus proposition, but he does not deny negative

consequences for disobedience. It seems he leaves the option open for Joan to do as she pleases, but he strongly advises her to follow his command.

The backwards wave that punctuates God's exit is an artifact that becomes an important trait for the God character throughout the series. It is not a dismissive wave because God delivers it in a friendly manner. It seems to serve as a "so long" instead of a "goodbye" because it interrupts the conversation, somehow pausing it until the pair pick it up again. After all, we now know that God will "see Joan around," and the viewers will be looking for him. This concludes the first interactions of Joan with God, specifically Cute Boy God. Later in the episode, Joan briefly speaks with God in the form of an African-American cafeteria server at her school, which affirms Cute Boy God's promise that Joan need not worry about having a crush on him. By the end of the pilot episode, Joan has successfully gotten a job at the Skylight Bookstore, which motivates her brother Kevin to look for work in an attempt to help move past the effects of his automobile accident. God did not tell Joan the reason for his request, but she goes to sleep assured that good came out of her obeying what God asked her to do. The first episode set up many integral elements of the show's structure and theology through the character of Cute Boy God. As it turns out, the writers chose to use the character on a recurring basis, and Cute Boy God is featured in eight other episodes, which is the most of any God character. The developing relationship between Joan and Cute Boy God is also important to study.

Developing the Relationship in Season One: Joan and Cute Boy God

“Touch Move”

In the third episode of season one, entitled “Touch Move,” Cute Boy God shows up once again at Arcadia High School. Joan enters an empty classroom to see Cute Boy God sitting on a desk.

Joan: What are you doing? You can’t be here.

Cute Boy God: And yet I am. Walk with me.

Joan: No, people are going to see me.

Cute Boy God: Yes they will. That optic nerve was an inspired idea, wasn’t it?

Joan: I meant that they’ll see you.

Cute Boy God: Yeah, I’ve noticed that this look turns a lot of heads.

God inserts himself into Joan’s immediate surroundings, once again affirming the ideals of relationship and immanence from the pilot. He is good-natured in this episode, and his sarcasm is more playful than before. It is interesting to note that the actor, Kris Lemche, makes Cute Boy God treat his interaction with Joan as more expected and commonplace than in the first episode, even though Joan is still somewhat surprised to see him. After referencing his role as creator, Cut Boy God continues the playful sarcasm:

Cute Boy God: Oh Joan, it would have been so much easier if you just read the book. Now I’m going to have to send you to the basement.

Joan: You mean like, Hell?

Cute Boy God: No, I mean, like, the basement. There’s one in the school. Check it out.

This dialogue continues themes established in the first episode with Cute Boy God. He does not deny or confirm the existence of Hell, but he does suggest a course of action to Joan since she did not follow the first instructions. In this particular episode, Cute Boy God is the second of three God characters to speak to Joan. Since she has interacted with him before, Joan is more apt to listen to Cute Boy God without apprehension. “Touch Move” follows Joan as she obeys God’s instructions to take up the game of chess, which in turn teaches her how to mend a broken relationship.

“Death Be Not Whatever”

In the series’ seventh episode, “Death Be Not Whatever,” Joan faces issues of death by babysitting a young boy named Rocky who has a terminal illness. She encounters Cute Boy God at the end of the episode, once again on the city bus. When he boards the bus, the dialogue begins:

Cute Boy God: Remember me?

Joan: Why all the familiar looks? Doing the greatest hits? Starting to get a little pleased with yourself?

Cute Boy God: You see me the way you want to see me, Joan. Like right now, you’re mad at me. Maybe you feel safer to be mad at me when I look like this.

Joan: You have a lot to answer for, buddy. Nobody asked to be born. So we all get to die, and then everybody we love dies.

Cute Boy God: Yeah.

Joan: And that’s – that’s good for you?

Cute Boy God: Joan, there's nothing I could say about that that would make sense to you.

Joan: A lot of what happens here really sucks. So much for your perfect system. Can you see me being really mad at you right now?

Cute Boy God: Yes.

In this exchange Cute Boy God returns to the conceit he set up in the pilot episode and deepens it. The audience understands now that Joan sees God as she wishes to at the time. Joan's relationship to God is deepening at this point, and it seems a wise choice for God to return in a form that Joan and the audience have already encountered. As he suggests, Joan and the audience can be more appropriately frustrated and hurt by a character they have already accepted and begun to like. It would not hurt as much if God delivered these lines in a brand new guise. It also may not show the duality of love and hurt in the scene as strongly. God is not angry with Joan for being angry with him. Instead, he listens with patience, care, and understanding. She continues:

Joan: Why does it have to be so hard?

Cute Boy God: What, specifically?

Joan: Being alive. Let's start there.

Cute Boy God: You wish you weren't alive?

Joan: No, I – I don't know. I wish it didn't hurt so much.

Cute Boy God: It hurts because you feel it, Joan, because you're alive.

You love people. That generates a lot of power, a lot of energy, same kind of energy that binds atoms together. And we've all seen what happens when you try to pry them apart.

Joan: So if I don't get attached to people, then it won't hurt so much?

Cute Boy God: No, it's in your nature to get attached to people. I put that in the recipe. It's when you guys try to ignore that, when you try to go it alone, that's when it gets ugly. It's hell.

Joan: It's hell? Like the Hell?

Cute Boy God: [The bus nears the Girardi home.] Oh, look. Your house.
Go on, Joan. People are waiting for you.

Joan's relationship with God deepens throughout this scene, as she cries in front of him while sharing frustration, fear, and pain. She is familiar enough with God in this guise to be vulnerable in front of him and honest with her feelings. The scene also suggests patterns that may be forming with Cute Boy God from previous episodes.

Once again, Cute Boy God affirms his role as creator. He explains to Joan how he created her people to be in relationships with each other. He designed her to love and be connected, just like he designed atoms. Cute Boy God continues his practice of asking Joan questions to lead her to introspection and answers. All the while, he is sympathetic to her pain. Also, Cute Boy God references hell without confirming or denying its existence as Joan is used to hearing about it. Instead, Cute Boy God redirects the emphasis to the part of hell that is separation and lack of connection. In the end, Cute Boy God does not answer Joan's question, which is consistent with Schrader's transcendental style. The meaning can transcend if the answer is not resolved. Instead, he encourages Joan to connect to the immediate people in her life, her family. The episode ends with both the audience and Joan having a deeper understanding of *JOA*'s God, and the intimate exchange was made possible by the recurring character of Cute

Boy God. His representation is, in fact, the closest in age and status to Joan. Therefore, she can feel identification, admiration, and anger at him with greatest ease.

“Recreation”

In the thirteenth episode, “Recreation,” God encourages Joan to have some fun. In this case, the suggestion for fun manifests itself in the form of a high school house party that Joan and her brother Luke throw while their parents are out of town. Cute Boy God shows up in the final scenes as one of the teenagers at Joan and Luke’s party. Joan is having trouble interacting with Adam, whom she has a crush on, and God comes in to agitate the situation when Adam leaves the room:

Cute Boy God: Wanna dance?

Joan: Can I say no?

Cute Boy God: Of course you can. Come on. [They dance.] So how did you like your party?

Joan: I don’t. What’s the big idea?

Cute Boy God: The big idea is recreation. You know what that means?

Joan: Whatever.

Cute Boy God: Well, let’s break the word down, shall we? Re-create. To create again. Begin again. To start over. People need to do that. Work is fine, but every now and then you’ve got to take a break and re-create.

Adam is confused.

This scene deepens Joan’s relationship to God, specifically Cute Boy God. It is significant that God asks Joan to dance because this implies that God enjoys Joan and wants the two of them to enjoy their interaction together. Her question about declining

the dance is also significant, as God's answer supports the theological idea of free will. The God of *JOA* definitely follows and promotes this idea. During their dance, God takes the opportunity to lovingly share a truth with Joan about new beginnings. The didacticism is secondary to the relationship God is enjoying cultivating with Joan. The fact that he is present at her party and helping her understand and repair her relationship with Adam, once again speaks of his immanence and intimate care for Joan and her life details. After this exchange, Joan tells God how she is confused about her relationship and is avoiding talking to Adam. Meanwhile, Adam sees Joan dancing with God, whom he only knows as a teenage boy, and leaves somewhat hurt. With that, God encourages Joan to go after Adam and re-define "whatever's become undefined." The episode ends with a patched relationship between Joan and Adam, as well as a relationship of deeper trust between Joan and Cute Boy God. Joan and Adam re-create and end the episode with a sweet and spontaneous outdoor dance.

"The Gift"

"The Gift" is *JOA*'s twenty-second episode, and God gives Joan the assignment of giving Adam a gift. At this point in their relationship, Joan and Adam have finally declared themselves a couple, but the relationship is in an early stage accompanied by common teenage nervousness. Joan feels it is too early to give Adam a gift, but God persists. Through a series of misunderstandings, Joan mistakes the gift for sex. In the middle of the episode, Joan sees Cute Boy God taking items out of his locker at school.

Joan: Great. You have a locker now. What do you keep in there? Wrath?

Cute Boy God: So are you going to walk away from him just when you're starting to get close?

Joan: I need some time to think, okay? I don't like what you're asking me to do.

Cute Boy God: I just asked you to get to know him better.

Joan: I did. It's turning out to be really weird.

Cute Boy God: Intimacy is never easy, Joan.

Joan: Why are you doing this to me?

God does not answer her question. Instead, he closes his locker and offers the signature backwards wave. The wave almost seems to say, "Just trust me. Follow along, and all will be well."

This short scene with Cute Boy God shows Joan in a state of panic and frustration with God's request. It is appropriate for her to address these feelings to Cute Boy God, as she has treated him that way in the past. The trust built with the character, though, provides a special context to Joan's feelings. By this episode, it seems as if Cute Boy God shows up at important turning points for Joan. Cute Boy God is the first God character to interact with Joan face to face. He also is present when Joan is confronted with questions about death, friendship, and sex. These are all issues suited to a context of friendship, and Joan has developed a friendship with the Cute Boy version of God over the course of the season that she does not necessarily enjoy with each God character.

The scene also shows how Joan can misunderstand God. In the end, all God wanted Joan to do was find out what Adam needed, which was someone to listen to him and encourage him. God shares important truths about intimacy with Joan in the scene, but she misunderstands him at first.

“Silence”

The finale episode of season one, “Silence,” is a complex episode that introduces a major cliffhanger to the narrative of *JOA*. It is the first major episode to incorporate several of the recurring God characters at once. Because of this reason, I will discuss the entire episode in greater detail in a later chapter. For now, I will offer a brief synopsis and highlight only a portion of Cute Boy God’s involvement in the episode, in order to keep the chronological study of his character intact.

“Silence” begins with a dream sequence experienced by Joan’s mother, Helen. Helen relives the night of Kevin’s accident, then finds herself inside a church bargaining with God:

Helen: Look, here’s the thing. You can’t let my son die. You just can’t. I know I haven’t been good, but that’s no reason to punish him. Take me instead. Just don’t punish him for what I’ve done wrong.

Cute Boy God: Do you think that’s how I work, Helen?

Helen: Who are you?

Cute Boy God: I’m God.

Helen: As in God? Burning Bush, Tower of Babel, Ten Commandments, God?

Cute Boy God: I’ve been through this with your daughter.

Helen: What does my daughter have to do with this?

Cute Boy God: Everything.

Just like Joan’s first encounter with Cute Boy God, Helen brings up bargaining with God. Once again, Cute Boy God dismisses this notion. It is important to note how similar

Joan's concept of God is to Helen's. After all, Joan is Helen's daughter, and both of them have faced hardships with Will's police job and Kevin's accident. It is important that Joan and Helen encounter the same God character first because it makes the audience question if Helen may have similar encounters with God in the future. It also shows that other characters can see and interact with God, besides Joan. This may be one defense against the argument that Joan may be hallucinating, which becomes a plot point by the end of the episode. After this initial exchange in Helen's dream sequence, Cute Boy God's body transforms into Joan, but he keeps his same voice.

Cute Boy God (as Joan): She's open to possibility. That's my favorite instrument.

Helen: What are you talking about?

Cute Boy God (as Joan): Just be open. That's all I ask.

This short segment opens up several possibilities for the future of the series. Helen can now identify Cute Boy God from her dream, which makes viewers wonder if she will ever talk to him in the future. Secondly, the segment ties Joan to God's plans more heavily than any other episode. When God says she has "everything" to do with it, that is a statement with gravity. Later in the episode, Helen visits a church to clear her mind and think, after being rattled from her dream. Cute Boy God enters in the back of the church, and it seems like Helen may interact with him until Father Ken Mallory addresses her. This is the first time, in the reality of the show, that Cute Boy God is present in a scene with a central character other than Joan.

The episode follows Joan through the final day of classes for the school year, as she experiences strange physical symptoms. "Silence" culminates with a doctor

diagnosing Joan with Lyme disease. According to the doctor, the disease can cause a person to hallucinate, which makes Joan wonder if God was ever really talking to her. I will save the details for later analysis, but Cute Boy God plays a pivotal role in the end of the episode.

Further Integration in Season Two

“Only Connect”

In the premiere episode of *JOA*’s second season, “Only Connect,” we meet up with Joan after a summer at Gentle Acres, a camp designed to help students with mental illnesses. Joan refers to it as “crazy camp,” where she learned to make and wire lamps for arts and crafts. Joan has learned to believe that she never truly talked to God because she was supposedly hallucinating. However, her plan for a pleasant return to Arcadia is interrupted by visits from the deity, including Cute Boy God. Near the end of the episode, Cute Boy God visits Joan at work:

Cute Boy God: Hi.

Joan: I can’t hear you.

Cute Boy God: But you can see me.

Joan: I’m ignoring you.

Cute Boy God: I’m used to that. Okay, look. I’ve got a lot of time on my hands. I’ll be in the religion section.

Cute Boy God is back to his old charms, and Joan, once again, is not amused. With his sweet sarcasm intact, Cute Boy God tries to resume interaction with Joan. He is patient, as before, and politely debunks her arguments against him. He also speaks to his transcendence and infinite nature, as he “has a lot of time on his hands.” It is also

interesting that he decides to visit the religion section. This, once again, shows a God that does not necessarily view religion as central to life. If he did, why would he need to browse through the section?

The final scene finds Joan locking up the bookstore. She struggles with trying to simultaneously ignore Cute Boy God and kick him out of the store. Joan declines his offer to walk her home, but God patiently and kindly persists:

Cute Boy God: You know I'm real, Joan. You've always known you're not crazy. Then you get the chance to see what it really looks like. Crazy is destructive. It tears down. I'm all about building up.

Joan: Then I suggest you take up carpentry.

Cute Boy God: What do you think this is all about?

Joan: Uh, you, I suppose.

Cute Boy God: It's a creation, Joan. It's not a destruction. And that's what I want you to do. I want you to be creative. I want you to build things.

Joan: I build lamps.

Cute Boy God: Relationships. Possibilities. Connections. Look, have you read this? [He indicates a book.]

Joan: You stole that!

Cute Boy God: Well, technically, everything's mine.

This exchange shows Joan's agitation, as God once again proves omniscient. He knows she doubts the diagnosis that she was hallucinating, especially since she is presently interacting with God in such a lively manner. The spat, like before, features God in

patient and pleasant control of the situation. Cute Boy God uses his smile to penetrate Joan's defenses, just as before.

The fact that Cute Boy God "stole" the book makes several clever statements about the nature of *JOA's* God. His immanence and transcendence are both upheld in the scene. The book is *Howard's End*, and he uses it as a jumping off point for a discussion. Only an immanent God, involved in every aspect of his created world, would use a literary reference as a conversation starter. The fact that he owns the book, as well as everything else, speaks of his transcendence. Cute Boy God asks Joan to read the opening line of *Howard's End*:

Joan: "Only connect." [She begins to cry.] You hurt me. Really bad.

Why should I trust you again?

Cute Boy God: Why did you ever?

Joan: Look, we had some good times. And I'm fine with you being the divine "it," but I don't want to see you anymore. It's not you. It's me. I – I'm just – I'm not the girl for you. I – I had a taste of normal, and I really liked it, you know? I really enjoyed being optimistic and making my lamps.

Cute Boy God: Don't you miss me a little?

Joan: [She is obviously lying.] No. Please go.

Cute Boy God: Do you miss yourself? Because I do. [He walks across the street with a backwards wave, as the orange caution hand symbol from the crosswalk blinks beside him.]

This emotional scene is obviously written to resemble, in part, a teenage break-up. God asks important questions that force Joan to think. She finally shares the true feelings that God hurt her in "Silence." God makes Joan confront the reality of faith with his questions. Kris Lemche acts the character with compassion and sadness as Joan rejects him. Cute Boy God's eyes water some during the scene. As he always does, God brings the episode to its fundamental themes and questions. He misses Joan's true self, and that is what the whole journey is to be about, not religion, as he explained in the pilot episode. It is significant and appropriate that the writers chose to have Cute Boy God initiate both the initial relationship at the beginning of the series and the reconciliation of the relationship in the beginning of the second season. In this instance, the backwards wave carries caution with it, thanks to the traffic light. It is sadder than before and a warning to Joan to please follow.

"Out of Sight"

The second episode of season two, "Out of Sight," begins with a dream sequence involving several of the God characters. This will also be discussed more later, but as is appropriate, the first God character to appear in Joan's dream is Cute Boy God. The main plotline of the episode introduces a new and important character, Judith Montgomery, played by Sprague Grayden. Judith is a friend of Joan's from Gentle Acres who transfers to Arcadia High School. When Judith's parents leave for the weekend, Judith and Joan decide to throw a party. God reminds Joan several times throughout the episode to "keep her eyes open." The episode reaches its climax when paramedics rush Judith to the hospital due to the excessive amount of liquor she had consumed. When Joan rushes to Judith's side, she sees Cute Boy God nearby:

Joan: Oh, my god. Why are you letting this happen? Do something!

Cute Boy God: Keep your eyes open. That's all I asked.

Joan: Oh, you're blaming me for this? No way are you blaming me!

A commercial break stops this scene from escalating further. The bewildered Joan is angry at God for not intervening on behalf of her friend. Kris Lemche plays God with a sadness suggesting that he wishes he could do something, but cannot. Joan learns through this episode that there are consequences to actions, and people are knit together to help each other out. God is not shown as being incompetent in the episode. Rather, he helps Joan understand that world operates as he created, and he created her to help the situation she neglected. It is important to note that Judith recovers from the incident and another God character is actually present at the hospital, as if to oversee the care of Judith. In this specific scene, it is up to Cute Boy God, once again, to help Joan learn a hard lesson.

"Dive"

"Dive," the eleventh episode of *JOA*'s second season begins with Cute Boy God asking Joan to do something that scares her. Their initial dialogue is sarcastic, as usual. Joan assumes God wants her to conquer her fear of diving, but that is not necessarily what he said. By this episode, Judith has already been killed from involvement with some seedy characters from her past.

Cute Boy God appears a second time during one of Joan's dream sequences. In the dream, Joan is standing at the edge of a diving board, as Cute Boy God and Judith encourage her to dive. Joan gets scared and is unable to dive in her dream. In the reality

of the episode, Luke struggles to overcome his fear of diving, but is ultimately successful.

After Luke's victory dive, Joan sees Cute Boy God again at school:

Joan: Oh you really are omnipresent, aren't you?

Cute Boy God: I get around. What your brother did took a lot of guts.

Joan: Yeah well, I had my doubts there right up until the end.

Cute Boy God: Everyone does. Fear is very powerful. It paralyses people. They don't see the value in it.

Joan: In being terrified? No. We don't. Because we're not insane.

Cute Boy God: But you saw Luke, how happy he was. He found that other part of his life that he wanted. You think that would have happened if he kept running from what he was afraid of?

Joan: Okay, okay! I'll suit up and dive.

Cute Boy God: I never said you had to dive.

Joan: Hello! You've been all over me about this. What about the dreams?

Cute Boy God: The dreams weren't about the high board, Joan. You know that.

This is the final scene between Joan and Cute Boy God in the entire run of *JOA*, and like the others, it says much about the nature of God.

First of all, God admits that he is omnipresent. This is an element of both the show's set-up and its theology. Secondly, Cute Boy God takes the opportunity to patiently teach Joan about fear. As the cute teenage boy, this God character plays the love/hate part well. He can agitate Joan to action because he gets on her nerves and charms her at the same time. Third, Cute Boy God, helps Joan be honest with herself,

just like he did in “Only Connect.” Joan does not need to dive. She needs to visit Judith’s grave and confront the reality of Judith’s death to properly grieve. Finally, it is interesting to note that Cute Boy God was, as Joan puts it, “all over” her in the episode. This is the only time his character has appeared three times to Joan in the same episode. This speaks to the persistent nature of a God who lovingly pursues his children. It also coincides with Cute Boy God as the God character the writers chose to go with Joan through some difficult realizations. For his final scene in the series, Cute Boy God is not sarcastic. His love and support are more important for Joan to experience at this time. The episode concludes with Joan visiting Judith’s grave.

Cute Boy God is the first God character to interact with Joan, as well as the first God character to recur in the narrative of the series. His physical characterization helps both Joan and audiences relate to him. His nonverbal presentation is also in line with Schrader’s transcendental recipe for using sparse means to portray the divine through commonplace people and activities with disparities that transcend the mundane and bring the audience closer to divinity. His dialogue was carefully chosen to explain the set-up of the show, as well as many important points of the show’s theology. Kris Lemche’s endearing performance helped Cute Boy God relate to Joan with warmth and charisma. However, he is just one of several important representation of God in the world of *JOA*.

Chapter Three: Little Girl God

First Encounter: "The Fire and the Wood"

In the second episode of the series, God pilots the plot by encouraging Joan to take pride in both her work and herself. God first appears as an evening news anchor and speaks to Joan through the television. Next, he is a street sweeper. Each of these representations brings a significant element of humor to God and Joan's interaction. Midway through the episode, Joan and Kevin argue in the park about his refusal of trying to move on with his life in a positive way after his accident. Joan is left crying when a child's ball comes bouncing toward her. A little girl begins speaking to Joan:

Little Girl: Why are you crying?

Joan: I got in a fight with my brother.

Little Girl: Because he doesn't try hard enough?

Joan: You heard that, yeah?

Little Girl: I hear everything, Joan.

This final statement provokes Joan to turn around. She has been surprised by God's likeness before, but this God character generates different reactions from both Joan and the audience. The character, played by Juliette Goglia, comes to be known as Little Girl God to both writers and fans. The visual communication associated with the character is of particular interest.

First of all, Joan sees God in the form of a child. This elicits a response of both surprise and wonder from Joan and the audience. Can such a small person represent the Creator of the universe? Is that small voice the same voice that called the Earth into existence? It seems to make Joan approach God with more reverence and curiosity than

before. Joan does not initially use the sarcastic tone of talking back to a parent, as she readily has with other God characters. Secondly, God is in the form of a female child. While Joan has seen God in female form before, the first child God she meets is a female first-grader on the playground. This is yet another reminder that *JOA* explores the nature of God. God never shows up as a small boy, save for one scene in one episode of the second season where God appears as a boy scout. This seems to assist viewers in not mistaking God, as represented in *JOA*, as the Messiah of Christianity. This is a minor but pertinent note.

For the most part, Little Girl God dresses like a typical child who takes pride in looking nice. Her attire is clean, neat, pink, and green, with a plaid dress and striped sweater. Her outfit is a proper set of play-clothes. She also wears glasses, which stereotypically suggest she may be a smart young student. One portion of her costume seems to serve as a more specific metaphorical artifact. In this, her first episode, Little Girl God wears a headband wrapped in orange fur that supports two large lidless eyeballs on the tops of slightly springy pink antennae. On the surface the headband of eyeballs would seem like a common and silly child's toy. Since the child represents God, though, there are larger implications. The scene continues:

Joan: Let Kevin walk, please. I'll just ask this one favor and then I'll never ask for one again. It's so easy for you. All you have to do is snap your fingers or blink your eyes. Just let Kevin stand up and walk.

Little Girl God: People ask me to do things; big things, little things, billions of times every day.

Joan: What do you expect? You're God.

When Joan suggests a blink of God's eyes to make Kevin walk, viewers cannot help but shift their gaze to the large lidless eyeballs. These eyes cannot blink. Little Girl God does have her physical eyes behind her glasses, and yes, these eyes can blink, but the image of the headband's odd wide eyeballs stands out visually because they are odd and attract interest. The scene is consonant with the theological notion of omniscience that Cute Boy God explained to Joan in the first episode. It suggests that God's eyes never close to humanity. He is watching and aware of all that goes on. Little Girl God says she hears everything, but the image reminds us that she sees everything too. The large eyes also complement the image of the child wearing glasses. They accentuate the magnificent intellect of the God that comes in the guise of this small person.

Little Girl God: I put a lot of thought into the universe. Came up with the rules. It sets a bad example if I break them. Not to mention, it shows favoritism. Why should one person get a miracle and not everybody else? Can you imagine the confusion? It's better when we all abide by the rules.

Joan: No miracles.

Little Girl God: Miracles happen within the rules. That's why I came to you.

Joan: To perform miracles?

Little Girl God: You're an instrument of God, bound by the limit of time and space. Perfect. Can I have my ball? You'd like to give me a slap, wouldn't you?

Joan: Yeah, but you're so cute.

Little Girl God: By the way, as an instrument of me, have some pride. Do better. Do your best.

Joan: Now, I'd like to slap you.

With that, Little Girl God walks away with her ball while offering Joan the same backwards wave, just as Cute Boy God did. This exchange is fraught with clues to understanding the show's theology, as well as connections with the first recurring God character, Cute Boy God. Concerning Schrader's transcendental style, it is significant that God does not answer Joan's question about miracles. Since Schrader believes transcendence takes place when characters encounter a disparity, then transcend it without resolution, it seems fitting that God does not offer pat answers to Joan's questions. This allows both Joan and viewers to encounter truth and formulate answers themselves.

Theologically, the youthful God shares much insight with Joan. Not only does she uphold the doctrine of omniscience, but she also speaks as the creator God. References to thought, rules, and the limits of time and space support God's intelligent design of the universe. It is also no coincidence that Little Girl God is playing with a blue ball while talking about time and space. This artifact is subtle, but it suggests that God does hold the world in hand. If Little Girl God were playing with puppets or a toy wand, the connotations to the nature of God would be completely different. So, the connotation of the blue ball as the created world is significant.

Little Girl God extends the understanding of God's creative purpose beyond matter to individuals when she calls Joan "an instrument of me" and "perfect." Not only is Joan a created being, she is a perfectly created being. God perfectly made Joan just the

way she should be. This suggests that the God of *JOA* is both the creator and sustainer of life. God did not create the world and then leave it alone. He created the world in the first place and has never ceased to perform his creative work. If Joan is an instrument of God, that means God created her with a purpose to fulfill, which hearkens back to the pilot episode when Cute Boy God wants Joan to “fulfill her true nature.”

The scene also upholds the paradox of God’s immanence and transcendence as originally presented by Cute Boy God. Little Girl God’s statement, “Miracles happen within the rules,” is the best example of this. A miracle is a phenomenon that transcends the expected norm. However, Little Girl God is claiming that miracles happen within the norm. This philosophy corresponds to Schrader’s transcendental style by once again suggesting that divine revelation, or miracles, can happen through a commonplace experience, or the norm. Joan may not be accustomed to noticing the “miracles that happen within the rules,” as being miraculous.

The end of the scene shows God’s playfulness and humor. This, however, plays differently from the sarcastic wit of Cute Boy God. When Little Girl God teases Joan, she is a mischievous child teasing someone she cares about. It is the type of endearing annoyance only children can get away with. She succeeds in her attempt, as evidenced by Joan’s response in acknowledging her cuteness.

It is also important to remember that the young child speaking philosophical wisdom is playing on a playground with a ball. Children at play can have the most intense creative concentration, and representing God in such a situation casts God as taking joy in creating life and giving attention to all of its details. It is also important to note that God tosses Joan the ball over the chain link fence, but ultimately asks for Joan

to return it. It is as if God is the teacher, Joan is the student, and the ball is the visual aid. Joan is trying to understand how the universe works, and God allows Joan to hold the ball, or planet Earth, while giving Joan an explanation. When Little Girl God feels Joan has heard enough, she asks for the ball back. God wants to share creation with humanity through personal relationships, but still maintains the ultimate control. The fact that a chain link fence separates the two characters is interesting. The fence is a physical separation between the two characters in the scene, but it is a separation they can see through. Inasmuch as the scene is a teaching moment for Little Girl God to explain the universe and miracles to Joan, it is fitting that the two are not on the same physical plane. It is a small but significant choice in the visual setting of the scene, and it does not necessarily contradict other scenes of teaching between God and Joan. *JOA* explores the nature of God through new likenesses and metaphors in each episode. This is just the metaphorical angle through which one particular scene is set up. The scene ends with Little Girl God offering Joan a backwards wave. This artifact soon becomes a trademark gesture for the deity. The wave seems to say, "That is all for now, Joan, but I am in control and there is more knowledge to come."

Developing the Relationship in Season One: Joan and Little Girl God

"Death Be Not Whatever"

The first episode of the series to deal specifically with death, "Death Be Not Whatever," also happens to be the first episode including appearances by both Cute Boy God and Little Girl God. The fact that both recurring characters participate in the same plot line is significant in understanding the differences between the characters, as well as their commonality. Little Girl God is the second God character Joan speaks with in the

episode. It is important to note that Joan initiates their encounter this time, as Joan walks to the park in order to ask Little Girl God about her mission in helping Rocky and his mother. The scene opens with Joan walking up behind Little Girl God swinging on the swing set. Again, the chain link fence separates the two, and Little Girl God is swinging with her back to Joan. In another affirmation of God's omniscience, Little Girl God knows that Joan is approaching and speaks to her without turning around.

Joan: Hey! Hey!

Little Girl God: Hi, Joan. How do you like baby-sitting?

Joan: It's ok. He's kind of freaky, you know.

Little Girl God: He has a lot on his mind.

Joan: Like his asthma?

Little Girl God: It's not asthma. He tried to tell you what it is, but you ignored him. I understand why. You don't want to look at anyone's pain. The trouble is, when you try to avoid it, you stop helping. People end up alone.

This passage portrays the God of *JOA* as upholding both truth and love. Little Girl God wants Joan to care for Rocky's true pain. She is encouraging Joan to get at the root of Rocky's problem, instead of offering a surface cure. Little Girl God also affirms connected living through relationships, as she does not want people to "end up alone."

Joan: You care about everybody so much. Why can't you help them?

Little Girl God: Hey, I'll do my job, and you do yours.

Little Girl God continues the thread of Joan "fulfilling her true nature" in this exchange. As previously established, God created Joan with a purpose to fulfill, which is woven

together with her personality and physical being by design. Little Girl God affirms her own distinct place in the universe, as well as Joan's. They continue:

Joan: Mine is confusing. I thought I was supposed to help the mother, and now I'm supposed to help Rocky. Where does it end?

Little Girl God: It doesn't. Help kind of moves around, like light. Even a little bit is good.

This exchange includes the first time that Little Girl God uses the metaphor of light. The light metaphor appears throughout the scripts of *JOA* at different times to emphasize the importance of bringing clarity and understanding to life. In this instance, likening help to light illustrates how helping someone in need has the potential to bring understanding to both people involved. The helper can learn more about the human condition, and the person being helped can learn about love, which comes from God. Also, it is a way to combat the darkness of the world. When Little Girl God explains that the direction to help others is unending, she reinforces the idea that following God is also a way of living, instead of only specific missions with definitive beginnings and endings.

Joan: Well, if I help two people, do I at least get extra points?

Little Girl God: It's not a point system, Joan. You don't get coupons.

Joan: What kind of system is it?

Little Girl God: A perfect one. Trust me.

Joan: I'm listening.

Little Girl God: I'm finished. [She walks away, offering the signature backwards wave.]

Joan: Hey!

The ending of this scene reinforces two theological tenets that seem to be emerging from the scripts, concerning the God of *JOA*. As Cute Boy God mentioned earlier, God does not bargain because it is cruel. Little Girl God upholds this ideal when she dismisses Joan's ideas of extra points. Little Girl God also affirms that the system God designed is perfect. The scene ends with Little Girl God telling Joan to trust her and leaving before Joan's questions are answered. The backwards wave is becoming an artifact representing Joan's faith in God. God tells Joan just enough for the moment. Joan receives all the instruction and explanation that she needs for the time, although she usually wants more. The backwards wave shows that God will return with more morsels of wisdom to assuage Joan's hunger.

"Night Without Stars"

In the fifteenth episode of the first season, God instructs Joan to work with children. So, she volunteers with a new classmate, Iris (played by Misti Traya), to help with art therapy sessions for children from abused homes. Through the course of the episode, Adam becomes interested in Iris, since he and Joan have yet to define their relationship. Joan ends up canceling plans to go with Adam to see a band, The White Stripes, in concert in order to volunteer with the children. The insult to the injury is that Adam asks Iris to go in Joan's place.

"Night Without Stars" marks the first time Joan encounters Little Girl God outside of the playground. In this instance, Little Girl God is playing with the other children in the art therapy session and goes initially unnoticed by Joan. Their interaction begins when Little Girl God interrupts Joan from altering the volunteer schedule in order

to go to the concert. As before, Little Girl God speaks to Joan when Joan is behind her back, which again accentuates the representation of omniscience. Little Girl God motions Joan to her desk:

Little Girl God: Stick to the schedule, Joan.

Joan: But I really want to go to the concert. Adam will kill me if I cancel.

Little Girl God: He won't kill you.

Joan: Please don't make me cancel on Adam. I can't stand him hating me again. It would be like being in some Russian goulash.

Little Girl God: Gulag. I don't make you do things. I'm getting bored with saying that. Go to the concert if you want. By the way, they aren't brother and sister. They were a couple, but they broke up. Have fun.

[She leaves the classroom offering her backwards wave.]

Joan: [She yells after Little Girl God.] You know I'm not going, you jerk.

This final remark causes the children in the room to look at Joan with awkward curiosity, as they obviously do not understand Joan's relationship with the little girl. This scene, like other scenes with Cute Boy God, references the doctrine of free will. God does not make Joan do anything. In another nod to both immanence and omniscience, Little Girl God makes a comment about the relationship between the members of the band, The White Stripes. This shows that God knows what Joan is thinking about and is also informed about popular culture, as The White Stripes are not a fictional band. This is just another example of a God who is intimately acquainted with all of the world's details.

Midway through the episode, Iris returns to find that Joan has allowed the children to make a piñata. This disturbs Iris, as it reminds her of the violent reason the

children are in therapy in the first place. When Joan goes to apologize to Iris, she leaves Little Girl God “in charge” of the rest of the children. This short and ironic scene is humorous to the audience, as Joan presumes to put the master of the universe “in charge” of the classroom.

At the conclusion of the episode, we find Adam coming to pick up Iris from another of the children’s therapy sessions. He is surprised to see Joan there as well. Their exchange is awkward, as Adam decides to date Iris. The scene concludes:

Adam: So you’re okay with me and Iris?

Joan: I have to be.

Iris: [Enters.] Hey.

Adam: Hi.

[Iris grabs Adam’s hand.]

Iris: [She notices Little Girl God.] Who are you?

Joan: Uh, she’s new. I know her mother. It’s okay. You can go.

Iris: Good night.

Little Girl God: Good night.

[Adam and Iris leave.]

Joan: The way I felt about Iris...it was so ugly. Why would you put those feelings in me?

Little Girl God: Everyone has a part of themselves they don’t like, Joan. You carry it around like a weight. The lucky ones realize that when it becomes too heavy you can choose to set it down. That’s when you can see things the way they really are. Come on. I’ll walk you home.

Joan: [She takes her hand.] Great! I'm being escorted home by a six-year-old.

[The two walk off hand in hand.]

It is important to note that Adam and Iris can both see and interact with Little Girl God. This dispels any notion that Little Girl God might exist only in Joan's imagination. The fact that Little Girl God is present and participatory in an art therapy class for children of abusive parents also suggests that God may be compassionately involved in the lives of others, besides just Joan.

This final scene of the episode is also significant to the theology of *JOA*. Here, Little Girl God posits the idea of sin getting in the way of true design. She uses the metaphor of a heavy weight to identify with the stress and pain Joan is feeling as a result of the sinful part of who she is. Little Girl God makes sure to point out that Joan can choose to relinquish this part of her life. Although she speaks about the issue in limited and metaphorical terms, it seems that Little Girl God acknowledges that sin is both innately human and a human choice. She also notes that everyone has such a part of himself or herself. If Joan chooses to let go of her sin, she can see life as it truly is.

The final image of the scene is a poignant symbol of faith. As Joan and Little Girl God walk down the hall, the image is striking. Joan seems more than twice the size of her young escort, and yet Joan is not the one in control. The image is pro-faith and anti-reason, as a trusting Joan allows a first-grade female God to lead her home. It is a picture of security in the reverse of the expectation. Instead of Joan comforting the child, the child is comforting Joan. At this point in their relationship, Little Girl God and Joan are walking hand in hand, instead of occupying opposite sides of a chain link fence.

“Silence”

As mentioned previously, the final episode of season one, “Silence,” incorporates several recurring God characters in a cliffhanger plot bridging the two seasons of the show. As it is the first episode where multiple God characters appear in one scene, the episode is unique. Therefore, I will discuss it in a later chapter, after introducing the other God characters involved in the episode.

Further Integration in Season Two

“Only Connect”

In the premiere episode of *JOA*’s second season, Little Girl God is one of three recurring God characters that try to reconnect with Joan, even though Joan is trying to convince herself that the God characters are only hallucinations. When Joan is studying in the park, she thinks Adam has walked up behind her:

Joan: Oh good. Just in time for unified field theory. Having a little trouble with it, but it is awesome.

Little Girl God: All magnetic fields are the same.

[Joan turns to see Little Girl God carrying the same blue ball from her first scene in the series.]

Little Girl God: All carbon atoms are the same, as are all electrons, protons, and neutrons. It didn’t have to be that way; but it makes the universe beautiful. Who would care about the universe being beautiful except for a divine benevolent entity, such as myself?

Just as in their first encounter, Little Girl God affirms her role as the creator, as she discusses science with Joan and holds her blue ball. The God of *JOA* delights in beauty

and the perfect design of the universe. Additionally, there is no chain link fence this time when Little Girl God approaches Joan.

Joan: You are not here.

Little Girl God: Okay. Then you're talking to yourself.

Joan: I'm waiting for Adam.

Little Girl God: Adam got paged to work at the hotel.

[Joan's cell phone rings.]

Little Girl God: That's him calling to tell you. Aren't you going to answer it?

This segment with the cell phone involves another demonstration of God's omniscience, as well as God's involvement with the details of daily life. Little Girl God also appropriately teases Joan about talking to herself, as only a child could.

Joan: This is not happening.

Little Girl God: Mystery is just part of the deal, Joan.

Joan: I'm going to close my eyes, and I'm going to count to ten.

Little Girl God: Good luck with that.

Joan: One...two...three...[Joan opens her eyes.] You are not real!

Little Girl God: So people keep telling me.

[Joan leaves, as Little Girl God sits and plays with her blue ball.]

There is no backwards wave in this scene, as it is Joan who walks away, instead of God. This emphasizes how Joan is not upholding her side of the relationship. The fact that Joan leaves Little Girl God playing with her blue ball, a metaphorical artifact, also implies that God is busy caring for the world with or without Joan's involvement. Little

Girl God also directs Joan's attention to the role mystery plays in understanding God. Just because Joan does not understand God, Little Girl God is there. Even though Joan is trying to force herself into unbelief, Little Girl God exists. When she says, "So people keep telling me," Little Girl God allows the facts to speak for themselves, instead of arguing with Joan. Even in such a small argument, the God of *JOA* is both immanently involved in the situation and transcendentally beyond it.

"The Rise and Fall of Joan Girardi"

In the fourteenth episode of the second season, Joan saves the life of one of the snobbish popular girls at school by pulling her out of the way of a speeding car. Guest actress Hilary Duff plays the rescued girl, Dylan Samuels, who turns from belittling Joan to treating her like a hero. When Joan seeks solace from the confusion surrounding her new celebrity status in a stall in the ladies' room, there is a knock on the door.

Joan: Taken. Okay, the other stalls are free. How about giving me a little peace in here?

Little Girl God: I'm all about giving you peace, Joan.

Joan: [She opens the stall door.] God isn't familiar with my right to privacy?

Little Girl God: Things must be pretty bad for you to seek solace in a bathroom stall.

Joan: You wanted me to get to know the life I saved. I have. It's a little creepy. She won't leave me alone.

[Joan tries to shut the door, but Little Girl God pushes it back open.]

Little Girl God: She looks up to you. She needs a hero.

Joan: Why? She's already been saved.

Little Girl God: Some people can't see their own lives. They live in a kind of darkness. They think that the only way that they can see is by using someone else's light. That's what she's looking to you for.

Joan: But I can barely see myself.

Little Girl God: I know.

Joan: Nice. You know, a little pep talk every now and then wouldn't kill you.

Little Girl God: You're doing just fine, Joan.

Joan: So how do I make her see? What do I make her see? What? Hey!

[Little Girl God leaves Joan in the bathroom with a backwards wave.]

This scene demonstrates how God will pursue Joan when she is in need. There is no logical reason for Little Girl God to be walking into the ladies' room at Joan's high school during the school day. Whereas God often seems to pop up out of scenery of any given scene, this encounter is different. Little Girl God knows Joan is hiding and needs consolation, so she seeks her out. Little Girl God reminds Joan that she is there to give her peace, which is a theological statement about the nature of God.

This is also the second time that Little Girl God uses the metaphor of light to explain something to Joan. Joan can share her light, or her understanding, with Dylan. It is also significant that Little Girl God acknowledges that Joan still does not understand herself very well. This reinforces the idea that God uses the commonplace to do great things, which is a notion that follows tenets of both the Incarnation and Schrader's transcendental style. Little Girl God compliments Joan before she leaves, and the

backwards wave complements the conversation as if also saying, “You are doing just fine.”

“Romancing the Joan”

In the fifteenth episode of the second season, God tells Joan to study romantic literature for an extra credit assignment. The episode introduces the new character, Stevie, played by Haylie Duff, as a perky blonde who makes Joan jealous when Adam hires her as a design assistant. The jealousy and the extra credit assignment set up a series of events, culminating in Joan kissing her college-age English tutor, Roger, played by Mark Matkevich. After the kiss, Joan is cleaning up the bookstore, when she hears a familiar voice:

Little Girl God: And they all lived happily ever after. There’s a surprise.

You guys really like that ending.

[Joan walks over to Little Girl God who is seated reading a storybook, wearing a purple paper crown and a sweatshirt with a large red heart logo on the front.]

Joan: Yeah, well, you have a better one?

Little Girl God: They all moved towards spiritual growth and enlightenment?

Joan: Yeah. That’s going to work with the kids.

Little Girl God: Ever notice that the guy always has to risk his life and the girl is nearly dead when he finds her? It takes a kiss to wake her up, and they ride off together. It’s a nice metaphor.

Joan: For what?

Little Girl God: Death and resurrection.

Joan: Yeah, well, that's a fun party game.

Little Girl God: It happens all the time. The illusion dies so that something deeper can take its place.

[Joan sits in a chair across from Little Girl God.]

Joan: Are you saying that Adam and I are an illusion?

Little Girl God: Romance serves a purpose. It's a meditative state. It puts logic to sleep so that people can come together. Otherwise, you guys probably wouldn't risk it.

Joan: Why did you have to make love so complicated? I mean, couldn't that one thing have been easy?

Little Girl God: Love is big. It's a bright light in the universe. And a bright light casts a big shadow. So, what do you want to do, Joan?

Joan: How am I supposed to know?

Little Girl God: [She hands Joan the storybook.] By looking at it. Real love is hard work. You have to decide if you want it in your story, or if you'd rather just stay in the dream.

[Joan watches as Little Girl God leaves the bookstore with a backwards wave. Joan then opens the storybook to the last page, which reads, "...And they all lived happily ever after."]

This scene is fraught with both visual and verbal metaphors. The purple paper crown atop Little Girl God's head functions on multiple levels. On the surface, it is merely a child's arts and crafts project. Perhaps she even made it at a reading club. It is, at least,

an artifact complementing the fairytale storybook in her hands. Since the audience knows she is God, the meaning of the crown can extend beyond its plausible surface. The crown is purple, which is the traditional color of royalty, and it is sitting on the head of the creator of the universe. Little Girl God is also wearing her common color of pink, but this time a large red heart is stitched onto the front of her hooded sweatshirt. The sweatshirt is thematically linked to the romance-themed episode, but it also highlights God's endorsement of love. The storybook that Little Girl God reads and gives to Joan also functions as a metaphor. Joan is writing her story with the free will God has given her. Little Girl God's act of offering the book to Joan is also symbolic. The action asks the question, "Which ending will you choose to your story, Joan?"

Little Girl God also utilizes metaphors through her speech. For the third time in the series, Little Girl God employs the metaphor of light. Since she describes love's light as being big; she shows love as a great source of understanding and warmth. The greatest way to understand a person is to love them. Instead of using the opposite metaphor of darkness, though, Little Girl God refers to the shadow cast by love. This represents the confusion Joan is feeling. Little Girl God also extends the storybook metaphor through her speech, as she asks Joan what she desires in her life's story.

Finally, Little Girl God points out a fairytale archetype as being a metaphor for resurrection. The princess being awakened to life by the kiss of a prince represents resurrection. Little Girl God's interpretation opens the metaphor to a variety of interpretations. Some viewers may apply the metaphor to the scriptural resurrection of Christ. Little Girl God's explication, though, allows it to work on a more abstract and universal level. When she applies resurrection to the death of illusion and the rising of

deeper understanding, she allows Joan and viewers to make their own connections. Joan immediately applies it to her relationship with Adam, but it does not have to end there. Between the first and second seasons of the series, Joan experienced a crisis of faith. However, that crisis allowed her to bury a limited understanding of the God of *JOA*, and a deeper understanding and relationship grew in its place. For example, Joan used to speak to Little Girl God from a distance, separated by a chain link fence. Now, she plays with and listens to her creator with greater trust. The scene ends with a backwards wave which says, "The choice is yours, Joan. Trust it."

"Something Wicked This Way Comes"

The twenty-second episode of the second season became the series finale, against the plans of *JOA*'s creators. The episode includes a pivotal change in direction for the series, and it is evident the creators were planning a third season to explore the new direction it sets up. Because the new story arc was left unresolved by the network executives who canceled the series, speculation of elements of the episode is less conclusive than previous episodes. However, the episode also marks the final appearance of Little Girl God, so it is relevant to this study.

"Something Wicked This Way Comes" opens with Joan interacting with the ghost of Judith, her friend who died midway through the second season. Events from the previous episode have Joan suspicious of a new character named Ryan Hunter, played by Wentworth Miller. The audience can tell something is different because the episode's structure is significantly different from the usual. Instead of God appearing to Joan in the beginning, several scenes take place before God speaks with Joan. The ghosts of both Judith and Rocky give Joan advice in the beginning, seemingly in place of God's

messages in the usual episode structure. When Joan finally speaks with God, it is in the form of Little Girl God, who she sees jumping up and down on the other side of a thick wooden fence.

Little Girl God: Hi, Joan! It's me. Over here.

Joan: Oh God.

Little Girl God: That's right! It's me!

[Joan opens the gate to reveal Little Girl God jumping on a trampoline behind the fence.]

Joan: Can we cut to the chase? What's going on? 'Cause I don't want to go back to crazy camp.

Little Girl God: A lot of things are going on. Gravity, inertia, entropy, electrodynamics, strong force, weak force...

Joan: Oh, so we're being funny now, are we?

Little Girl God: I thought you'd be happy to see your friends.

Joan: Yes. Alive. That's how I like to see my friends.

Little Girl God: They were trying to illustrate a point. Matter is neither created nor destroyed.

Joan: Ok, I've been studying physics. I get that part.

Little Girl God: I know you understand it, but you have to believe it, because it's going to be on the other test, which is unlike any test you've ever had.

Joan: No chance you could help me study for this one, maybe give me an advance copy?

Little Girl God: Just start with the question.

Joan: What question?

Little Girl God: The one you asked the first time you saw me. Think about it.

Joan: Why me?

Little Girl God: That's the one.

[The scene ends with Little Girl God continuing to jump with her back to Joan and offering the backwards wave. Joan then closes the gate.]

This scene sets much into motion. First of all, the setting introduces a new separation between God and Joan. Joan can still see Little Girl God as the trampoline allows her to play peek-a-boo over the fence, but the thick high wood is a dramatic contrast to the chain link fence from the first episodes. Little Girl God once again discusses one of her favorite subjects, science. She continues to remind Joan of the design and balance of the created universe. She is also playful with Joan, which is a significant contrast to the somber and serious mood of Joan and her encounters with her dead friends. Little Girl God affirms that the ghosts of Judith and Rocky were used by God to make a point. So, the ghost conversations, as they take the place of the initial conversations with God in the structure of a normal *JOA* episode, make some sense; God motivated the ghost conversations.

In her final appearance, Little Girl God explains a significant point of theology to Joan. Little Girl God introduces two new ideas when she says, "I know you understand it, but you have to believe it because it's going to be on the other test, which is unlike any test you ever had." First, she makes a theological distinction between understanding and

belief. Knowledge leads to understanding, but faith leads to belief. In essence, Joan needs to live in faith of the reality of the knowledge she has acquired. The fact that this principle is attached to the notion of a test also implies action. So, Little Girl God is warning Joan that she will have to act on her knowledge and belief. Secondly, Little Girl God makes a plot-driven distinction between Joan's previous tests and the test that is to come. She sums up the entire scene by reminding Joan that God has had a plan for visiting Joan all along. She does this by redirecting Joan's thoughts to her initial question to God. The backwards wave is a small assurance that all will be well, even though the ghosts and seemingly evil nature of Ryan Hunter have Joan on edge.

Throughout her appearances in the series, Little Girl God offered a new perspective for audiences to understand the God of *JOA*, while also sharing similar traits with Cute Boy God. Little Girl God frequently explains complex scientific properties, which reinforce her identity as the creator God. The artifact of the blue ball also implicitly supports the creator God identity. Little Girl God is also a philosopher. She shares philosophical wisdom with Joan, who seems to respond to her messages more favorably than she does with Cute Boy God. After all, it is hard to stay angry with a child. Little Girl God is playful, like a child, and her teasing is less belittling than the sarcasm of Cute Boy God. Little Girl God also frequently speaks in metaphors, especially the metaphor of light. As befitting a child character, she seems always to be involved in a game of hide and seek with Joan. While other God characters just seem to pop up out of the scenery, the interaction between Little Girl God and Joan is more intentional. One character is always seeking the other. When it comes to major tenets of the overall nature of the God of *JOA*, the character of Little Girl God is consistent with

the character of Cute Boy God. They both suggest a creator God who is simultaneously transcendent, immanent, and welcoming a relationship with Joan.

Chapter Four: Old Lady God

First Encounter: "The Boat"

In the fourth episode of season one, God tells Joan to build a boat. Obeying what seems to be her strangest assignment yet, Joan begins to build a small boat in her garage from scrap pieces of wood. For a time, she makes much progress, but eventually she realizes she cannot properly finish the project. As it turns out, God uses Joan's flaws in boat design to bring Will and Kevin together. The father and son have been at odds with each other, and the common activity of fixing Joan's boat allows them the time and activity to talk about some of their differences. Near the end of the episode, Adam visits Joan while she is working at the bookstore. She is about to tell Adam that she has been talking to God, when a voice speaks up from another part of the store.

Old Lady: Hello? I could use some help here!

Joan: [To Adam.] Did you hear someone come in? [To Old Lady.]
Hello.

Old Lady: I'm in the large print section.

Joan: I'm sorry. I didn't know that there was a customer back here.

Old Lady: You need better lighting.

Joan: Oh, ma'am, this isn't the large print section. This is sports. Large print is over here.

Old Lady: Oh, thank you. You're a very sweet child. You were about to tell Adam.

Joan now realizes that the grandmotherly figure in the purple sweater and gold-chained glasses is God. By this point in the series, Joan seems less surprised to meet God in a

new guise. The character, played by Kathryn Joosten, comes to be known as Old Lady God, and her appearance is that of every teenager's grandmother.

Old Lady God's entrance is purposely ambiguous. Joan and Adam do not hear her enter the store. This opens up a few possibilities to keep both Joan and the audience guessing about the nature of the God of *JOA*. Perhaps, Joan and Adam were too wrapped up in their own conversation to notice Old Lady God's entrance. However, it is also possible that Old Lady God entered the bookstore in some supernatural manner.

The audience soon learns that Old Lady God has a sense of humor. Her first line, in fact, contains irony. Of course, God wants help from Joan. God has been giving helpful assignments to Joan for three and a half episodes by this point.

Although it is not treated as a prominent metaphor as with other God characters, it is appropriate to at least note that Old Lady God complains about the poor lighting. She does not offer a lesson about light and understanding. However, as a possible artifact, Old Lady God could be commenting on the lack of understanding in Joan's life or the philosophies of the bookstore. Most likely, though, God is enjoying the Old Lady persona.

Kathryn Joosten's delivery of her character's lines in this scene also suggests traits of her particular God character. For example, Old Lady God speaks like a proud parent when she says, "You're a very sweet child." Her delivery connotes a shared history between the two characters. Old Lady God, since she is but one manifestation of the God of *JOA*, already has a relationship with Joan.

Not only does Old Lady God enact the trait of omniscience, but she also demonstrates foreknowledge. She knows Joan is about to tell Adam about her

conversations with God. This element of foreknowledge can lead the audience to speculate that God's visits to Joan may be specifically designed as interventions based on foreknowledge. This is a theme that other God characters explore further throughout the run of the series. The scene continues:

Joan: Did you give me a boat-making mojo and then take it away?

Old Lady God: You know what I am going to say.

Joan: What? That you never gave it to me in the first place, so you never took it away?

Old Lady God: Excellent learning curve.

The emphatic encouragement in Old Lady God's response to Joan sets her apart from the other God characters, thus far. Of all of the God characters, Old Lady God is the most encouraging to Joan. She seems to delight in Joan and her progress, just like a proud grandparent.

Old Lady God: Now, what did I tell you on the radio?

Joan: Not to let anyone talk me out of pursuing my project. You mean Price? Was what Adam said true? Is Price, like, evil?

Old Lady God: Are you afraid of him?

Joan: Well, every kid in school is afraid of Price.

Old Lady God: The thing about fear is it doesn't leave room for anything else, like beauty or purpose. Your large print section is pitiful.

This exchange reveals that Old Lady God, like the others, does not necessarily answer Joan's direct questions. This time, Old Lady God asks Joan another question to lead her to a particular response. The dialogue also reveals that Old Lady God values both beauty

and purpose. The other God characters have also spoken highly of purpose, especially when encouraging Joan to fulfill her purpose. However, Old Lady God is the first to place a specific emphasis on the virtue of beauty.

Joan: So, did you just pop up to stop me from telling Adam about you?

Old Lady God: I don't pop. I abide. I am eternal. There is no popping. This memorable quote from the episode functions on multiple levels. Kathryn Joosten delivers the line with a bit of a flustered tone. Outside of the context of the scene, her line delivery might sound like a grandmother getting onto a grandchild for popping their chewing gum. On a deeper level, Old Lady God's statement affirms the ideal of God's trait as an eternal being. This line also makes both Joan and the audience question again whether Old Lady God really walked through the store unrecognized in the beginning of the scene, or if she made some type of supernatural entrance.

Joan: So, can I tell him?

Old Lady God: Oh, that's totally up to you. Free will. Just remember that it's a burden asking people to believe you.

Joan: Adam will believe me.

Old Lady God: Yes, but you don't know Adam that well yet. For example, you don't know how many burdens the boy is already carrying, and I'd like you to consider the possibility that it is you who should take on some of his burdens, not vice versa.

Like the previous God characters, Old Lady God promotes a doctrine of free will. Her clarification, though, differs from the rest. She seems to offer more answers than the other God characters, or at the least, she delivers them in a way that seems warmer than

Cute Boy God's sarcasm or Little Girl God's philosophizing. The scene also demonstrates how Old Lady God cares for Adam, as well as Joan. Her suggestion for Joan to help bear Adam's burdens is the closest thing to explicit instruction and answers that the God of *JOA* has offered thus far in the series.

Joan: Adam has burdens?

Old Lady God: Sometimes they look a lot like gifts.

Joan: What about my boat?

Old Lady God: You'll know when to let go.

[Joan and Old Lady God return to Adam at the front of the store. Old

Lady God exits the store, patting Adam on the shoulder on her way out.]

When Old Lady God pats Adam on her way out, it is a completely acceptable and kind gesture that any grandmotherly woman could potentially offer him. Therefore, it does not seem out of place to Adam. However, the audience understands that the gesture expresses how God also cares for Adam. Her quip linking burdens and gifts is delivered with the wisdom of a caring elder, which also seems plausible for someone with Old Lady God's appearance. The audience's knowledge that the character is God is what allows certain nuances to work. For example, Old Lady God's facial expressions are broad and knowing, like a somewhat mischievous elderly gossip. Since she is God, though, these expressions cast her as an omniscient being, rather than a busybody. Overall, her character exudes a feeling of warmth that Joan and the audience can appreciate.

Developing the Relationship in Season One: Joan and Old Lady God**“The Uncertainty Principle”**

In the eleventh episode of the first season, God suggests that Joan invite a feared bully named Steve Ramsey, played by Fred Koehler, to a school dance. After being kicked out of the dance for possessing alcohol, Ramsey drives away with Joan in his truck. He takes her to an outdoors hangout where he goes to shoot target practice with his pistols. When Will arrives in a police car, the disturbed Ramsey pulls a gun on him. Will persuades Ramsey to calm down, and he is arrested. The next day at school, Joan feels like a failure. She tried to help Ramsey, but he ended up in custody. Just then, Old Lady God appears as a volunteer selling cupcakes to support the soccer team.

Joan: You're getting really good at showing up when nobody needs you.

Old Lady God: Well, now, that's your opinion.

Joan: So what do you want me to fail at this time?

Old Lady God: What makes you think you failed? You did exactly what I asked you to do. You observed.

Joan: Hmm, and what good did that do anybody? Ramsey's going to jail. Adam hates me even more.

Old Lady God: Observation is a more powerful force than you could possibly reckon. The invisible, the overlooked, and the unobserved are those that are most in danger of reaching the end of the spectrum. They lose the last of their light. From there, anything can happen.

Joan: Okay, fine. I observed Ramsey. His life is still ruined.

Old Lady God: His life wasn't the only one at stake.

Joan: What do you mean?

Old Lady God: There's Laura Eason, ninth-grader. She plays the flute. She would have been one of the first to go, coming out of orchestra at the wrong time. And Andrew Bayer, he would have tried to save his friend Laurence Distasi and lost his life. And Gavin Price and three other students in the cafeteria and Mrs. Harvey and Mrs. Schmidt in the library. And finally Steve Ramsey himself. And for each of these faces, Joan, there are twelve more whose lives would have come to an end today; lives altered forever by you, by the simple effect of being present, by entering the light, by joining the dance.

It is appropriate that Old Lady God is the chosen God character to explain such dramatic events to Joan. None of the other God characters have yet taken the time to explain in such detail the effects of Joan's obedience. Old Lady God is a nurturing character, and thus the perfect person to exemplify God's love for all people. In another example of foreknowledge, Old Lady God demonstrates how several lives were saved as a result of Joan's obedience. She shows Joan that there is a bigger picture, a larger purpose, beyond her own interpersonal relationships. The paradox exists in the fact that this larger purpose was accomplished through Joan's interpersonal relationships with both God and Ramsey. Old Lady God affirms Joan's actions toward interpersonal connection.

Old Lady God also employs the light metaphor to make several points. As mentioned in previous chapters, light can represent self-understanding, the understanding of another, or both. If people are neglected or forgotten, they are not properly understood by others and therefore may misunderstand themselves. Referring to Joan's interaction

with Ramsey as “entering the light” is appropriate, then, as Joan actively sought to understand Ramsey and fix others’ false perceptions of him. During the climax, Will also “enters the light” by trying to relate to Ramsey and talk him out of making a rash decision. Joan cries in the presence of Old Lady God as the scene ends. This wise grandmotherly God brought an important caring message to her servant, and Joan can cry in this God’s presence.

“Silence”

As previously stated, I will discuss this episode in a later chapter, once the remaining recurring God characters are introduced.

Further Integration in Season Two

“Only Connect”

The second season premiere of *JOA* has Joan desperately trying to avoid conversations with God and attempting to convince herself that God is only a hallucination. However, Old Lady God arrives to foil her plan, as any concerned and spry grandmother would. Joan is working at the bookstore when Old Lady God drops in to ask for help, just like the first time Joan met her. She rings the bell on the counter for assistance, while Joan and her boss Sammy, played by Patrick Breen, turn toward her.

Old Lady God: Excuse me. Am I invisible? Can anyone see me standing here?

Sammy: We have a customer.

Joan: [To Sammy] I...I can't. I'm busy. Can you? You're so much better with people.

Old Lady God is clever, and her questions function on multiple levels. On the surface, her words sound like a disgruntled elderly woman suspicious of prejudiced treatment due to ageism. On a theological level, though, Old Lady God is reminding both Joan and viewers of God's immanence. The God of *JOA* is immanent, incarnate, and relatable. She asks these particular questions because of their double meanings that point out Joan's attempts at denial. After all, Sammy can see Old Lady God.

Later in the episode, Old Lady God returns to the bookstore and speaks with Sammy, while Joan is within earshot. She says, "I'm looking for a book. They just added it to our reading list. You know, for my book club. It's called One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, about a man who pretends to be crazy to get out of prison." Old Lady God is ruthlessly teasing Joan throughout her trips to the bookstore, in attempt to help Joan be honest with herself. Following this exchange, Sammy's wife Heidi, played by Cheryl White, enters the store and has a mental breakdown. Old Lady God stands beside Joan as if to point out that Heidi truly is mentally unstable, and Joan never was. She then leaves Joan alone with her thoughts and comparisons between herself and Heidi.

"Out of Sight"

The second episode of the second season begins with a dream sequence involving Joan, Old Lady God, and a few other God characters. I will discuss the dream sequence in a later chapter after discussing each of the God characters individually. However, Old Lady God plays other parts in the episode, as Joan initially ignores her, then later turns to her for comfort. In this episode, we learn that Sammy has taken a leave of absence to stay with Heidi after her breakdown and has left the store in the care of his best friend,

also named Sammy, played by Jack Plotnick. While Judith is visiting Joan at the bookstore, Old Lady God once again stops by the bookstore to talk with Joan.

Joan: I am done with you.

Old Lady God: Oh, here is one of the books your mother wanted.

Thoreau? Now, he believed that with a keen awareness of the natural world one could find truth.

Joan: You just can't stop, can you? [Joan opens the front door of the bookstore and pushes Old Lady God outside.] Get out. Out!

Sammy: What are you doing? Ms. Girardi!

Joan: [To Sammy.] She was stealing. [To Old Lady God.] Next time, I'll call the cops!

Sammy: Good work.

There is no mistaking that other characters can see and interact with Old Lady God, and yet Joan still dismisses her. This short humorous scene illustrates God's persistence in pursuing a relationship with Joan. Once again, Old Lady God demonstrates her omniscience and care for life's details by discussing the book Helen is searching for. Her reference to Thoreau focusing on the natural world serves multiple purposes. The reference is further evidence of the value Old Lady God places on nature's beauty. The comment also reminds Joan of the fact that Joan is "keenly aware" of Old Lady God's physical presence in the "natural world." Old Lady God is not content to allow Joan to live in denial of God, her relationship with God, and the fulfillment of her true nature. Old Lady God's persuasive tactics are consonant with the grandmotherly demeanor she exudes. A grandmother has the wisdom and experience to point out a child's errors by

using playful childlike tactics the child can understand. Instead of engaging in philosophical apologetics, like Little Girl God, Old Lady God calls attention to Joan's errors by playing along with them. Whereas Cute Boy God might persuade Joan with either charm or sarcasm, Old Lady God chooses to persuade Joan by mercilessly teasing her while simultaneously pretending not to tease her. Evidently, her tactics work, as Joan chooses to physically remove Old Lady God from the store. Old Lady God's persistence over the last two episodes is so effective, that simply ignoring her will not work. This particular scene with Old Lady God dramatically contrasts the final scene of the episode.

By the episode's end, Judith has been admitted to a hospital after drinking too much at a party. Joan has ignored both Cute Boy God and Old Lady God during the episode. She has also neglected to see just how much Judith was abusing alcohol. In the end of the episode, Joan is visiting Judith in the hospital when she sees Old Lady God dressed as a volunteer, or candy striper.

Joan: You should have been more specific. You could have made me.

Old Lady God: I can only point things out, give you choices.

Joan: [She begins to cry.] But what if I mess up again? I don't want to mess up again.

[Old Lady God hugs Joan, and Joan cries on her shoulder.]

Old Lady God: Come here. I know. I know. Shh. I know that. Shh. I know. Shh.

The scene ends with Old Lady God embracing Joan and consoling her like a grandmother would comfort a grandchild. Old Lady God does not moralize or sermonize at this point. She does not scold Joan or reiterate the points of the lesson. Instead, she stands there

supporting her “grandchild” and sharing in Joan’s pain. Old Lady God truly is the God character that represents the nurturing, comforting portion of God’s personality. The scene emphasizes the power and responsibility that come with God’s gift of free will, but Old Lady God does not force the lesson. The consequences of Joan’s actions have made their point, and Joan is now in need of Old Lady God’s comfort. By repeating, “I know,” Old Lady God reminds both Joan and audiences that the God of *JOA* intimately understands and longs to relate to mankind. The episode ends with a new understanding and reconciled relationship between God and Joan.

Old Lady God’s costume in this scene also exists as a metaphorical artifact. As a candy striper, Old Lady God is volunteering to help care for the sick and the hurting. She is not dressed as a head doctor, which has a “master of the universe” connotation. Instead, she is a simple unpaid servant who invests her free time in a hospital. God does appear as a doctor on occasion in *JOA*, and this representation still fits with the overall personality of the God of *JOA*. However, the specific character of Old Lady God would not fit in such a scenario. She portrays God as the caring, humble servant-nurturer.

“Independence Day”

In the sixteenth episode of season two, Joan is at odds with Helen. When Helen forbids Joan to spend the night in a camper with Adam at a music festival, Joan decides to disobey and sneak away to the overnight concert anyway. Throughout the episode, Helen is also struggling with the idea of losing touch with Joan as the two of them age. Joan also forgets to make a traditional batch of cupcakes with Helen, which hurts each of them at different points in the plot. Midway through, Joan strolls through the park and encounters Old Lady God feeding pigeons from a park bench.

Joan: God feeds pigeons? Aren't there enough actual old people to do that?

Old Lady God: You'd think, wouldn't you?

This initial small talk brings attention to another particular visual metaphor related to Old Lady God. Old Lady God has already established herself as a lover of natural beauty, and her appreciation of the pigeons follows this part of her personality. It also coincides with her identity as a nurturer. Although the God of *JOA* is not necessarily or solely representative of the God of the Bible, metaphorical parallels still link the two. For example, in Matthew 6:28 (New International Version) Jesus says, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" This passage seems to enlighten the image of Old Lady God feeding the birds. Not only does the image portray God's loving care of creation, but it also emphasizes the particular care God gives Joan, which is beyond God's care for the pigeons.

Joan: You said independence doesn't mean being alone. I can't talk to my mom. I can't talk to Adam. So, now I have nobody. I should just get one of those depressing motel rooms and learn how to smoke.

Old Lady God: You're only as isolated as you think you are. Not being able to reach out to others is just another decision you're making.

Joan: I made a mess of everything. There's nothing I can say to make things right.

Old Lady God: Falling into silence just makes it impossible to survive. Your existence depends on the relationships you have with other people,

Joan, just as matter can't exist in the absence of energy. See, it's how I made the world.

Old Lady God takes this opportunity to teach Joan and reiterate three of her favorite values. First of all, Old Lady God reminds Joan that she has the free will to choose to be either connected or disconnected from others. Second, she explicitly reminds Joan that life depends upon relationships. Following her distinctive style, Old Lady God's explanation is, once again, unambiguous and pointed, unlike messages from other God characters. Third, by discussing matter and energy, Old Lady God once again reminds Joan and her audience about God's design of the universe. Although these are both messages God has shared with Joan before, it is important to remember the artistic form. As a television series, *JOA* reaches a different group of audience members with each broadcast, replay, or rental. Therefore, repeating such messages is appropriate for a fluid audience that may not experience the program in a linear fashion. Also, Joan is a realistically depicted teenage character, who may need to be reminded of things often, like other teenagers. The scene continues with Old Lady God retelling the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, in which winter's transformation to spring symbolizes the reunion of mother and daughter. The Greek gods orchestrated the dramatic climax, which prompts Joan to continue the discussion:

Joan: So, are you going to take pity on me, too, and make things right?

Old Lady God: [Chuckles.] It's a myth, Joan.

Joan: What should I do?

Old Lady God: That's your decision.

[Old Lady God exits, handing Joan her birdfeed and leaving her alone on the park bench.]

Joan contemplates how to exercise her free will, and by the end of the episode, has reconnected with Helen. Joan follows Old Lady God's advice to the point of reconciliation. Joan and Helen transcend their pain and come to a new appreciation of each other. It is fitting that the wise and grandmotherly character of Old Lady God happens to be the God character that guides Joan in an episode focusing on the relationship between mother and daughter.

"Trial and Error"

In the nineteenth episode of the second season, Joan follows heavenly instruction to face off against her best friend Grace, played by Becky Wahlstrom, in the school's mock trial based on the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. Adam agrees to help Joan and Grace in their project by posing as the defendant, Jack. Unbeknownst to Joan, Adam has been unfaithful to her by being physically involved with their classmate Bonnie, played by Alexis Dziena. Partway through the episode, Old Lady God visits Joan while she is studying law books at the bookstore.

Old Lady God: Preparing the case, Joan?

Joan: Yes. Does God want to sit second chair?

Old Lady God: This one you're going to have to figure out for yourself.

Joan: Oh, well there's a first. I can't believe they're going for self-defense. He so killed that guy.

Old Lady God: Everyone has their own rationale for why things happen.

Joan: Yeah, and sometimes things are either wrong or right. You said so yourself.

Old Lady God: Yes, but figuring it out can be a real trial.

Joan: Cute.

Old Lady God: Thanks. You see, a trial is just an outward representation of what goes on inside people all the time, the moral debate. Am I good or bad? How do I behave in this situation? It's a state of examination where, hopefully, you find the truth.

Old Lady God begins the scene with congeniality and incorporates her trademark, grandmotherly humor into her speech. She approaches Joan with a balance of heart and wisdom. Joan and Old Lady God seem to interact more like friends than Joan and either Cute Boy God or Little Girl God. Joan seems to welcome visits from Old Lady God more readily than visits from the other two.

Old Lady God's explanation of the trial addresses a specific theological element of *JOA*. It is important to note that Old Lady God ends her comment with the phrase "find the truth" instead of the similar, but radically different phrase, "find truth." This small article tells both Joan and the audience that the God of *JOA* believes in an absolute truth. While the God of *JOA* rarely answers Joan's questions in black and white terms, preferring instead to let new questions serve as answers, this is a notable exception. Old Lady God acknowledges that people try to interpret truth under their own terms, but there is still only one truth. This is a critical distinction for the God of *JOA* to make, as its implications inform viewers about the nature of both the God and the universe described in *JOA*.

Joan: Have I done something that I don't know about?

Old Lady God: I shouldn't bother you anymore. You have a lot to do.

Joan: No. See, if you answer the question, then you're not bothering me.

Old Lady God: Knock 'em dead, Matlock.

Joan: Matlock? What are you, like a million?

[Old Lady God offers the backwards wave, with both hands this time, as she exits.]

Joan: Oh, that's right. You are.

As both viewers and scholars of Schrader's transcendental style have come to expect, Old Lady God does not answer Joan's question. The scene ends with more cross-generational playful humor and the introduction of a double backwards wave. Old Lady God makes this gesture in a playful manner to compliment the playful banter of the final few lines of the scene, which suits her grandmotherly relationship with Joan.

After this exchange, the episode follows the progress of the mock trial. The final trial segment shows Joan prosecuting Adam, but it takes on metaphorical meaning, as Jack and Adam are both guilty of taking something that did not belong to them. Joan confronts Adam after she wins the mock trial, and he confesses to sleeping with Bonnie. He tries to rationalize his actions by claiming the "bad sex" did not mean anything. However, Joan, like Old Lady God, believes in absolute truth. She says to him, "I don't want to hear you try to convince yourself that what you did was okay." Joan breaks up with Adam, and the next scene follows Joan as she boards the city bus. She takes a seat by Old Lady God. The scene begins:

Joan: You knew and you didn't tell me. That's your idea of justice?

Old Lady God: I don't interfere. You know that.

Joan: Yeah. Well, maybe free will wasn't such a great idea. I believed in him.

Old Lady God: I know. That's what makes it hurt so much.

It is important to note that Old Lady God is waiting for Joan on the bus, just like Cute Boy God did in "Death Be Not Whatever." Old Lady God is ready and waiting to meet with Joan at precisely the right moment. This upholds the tenets of foreknowledge and Old Lady God's role as Joan's nurturer and comforter.

As Joan's comforter, Old Lady God always understands Joan and her feelings, but this situation is unique. As evidenced by her words, Old Lady God is empathizing with Joan. Just as Joan believed in Adam, God believes in people. Just like Adam betrayed Joan's love for "a hook-up" with Bonnie, people also betray God's love by pursuing counterfeit relationships with sin. Just like Adam in Genesis, Adam in *JOA* is a betrayer, whom God still loves. Old Lady God understands Joan's pain, not only through omniscience this time. She can identify with Joan's pain because of humanity's betrayal. They continue:

Joan: What did I do to deserve this?

Old Lady God: Nothing. This isn't punishment, Joan. It's simply part of being alive, of being involved, of loving.

Joan: Yeah. I'm not doing that anymore. I'm never doing that again.

Old Lady God: I know how painful this is, but what you and Adam had was beautiful, too. And that was every bit as real as the pain that you're feeling now. You experienced how deeply two people can be connected.

Joan: So, what do I learn when someone I trust destroys all that, huh?

Maybe it was never real. Maybe you're not even real, you know? This morality thing, right and wrong, it's all junk. We're all just animals, taking what we want.

Old Lady God: Do you know what innocence is, Joan?

Joan: You know, I don't want mock trial right now.

Old Lady God: Well it's more than an absence of guilt. It's having faith that there's goodness in the face of cruelty and pain. Someplace [She puts her arm around Joan.], you still feel that way, and that's me. And I'll always be there. Oh, honey.

[Joan lays her head on Old Lady God's shoulder and cries, while Old Lady God holds her tightly.]

While Old Lady God empathizes with Joan, she keeps the connection of empathy at a healthy level. Old Lady God shares with Joan that she understands both why and how Joan is hurting, but she never joins Joan in angry or depressing generalizations. Instead, Old Lady God calmly changes the focus of the situation to a constructive discussion of innocence. Old Lady God is affirming the hope that resides in Joan and reminds her that she will never leave. This interaction lets both Joan and viewers know that the God of *JOA* is both faithful and eternal. Once again, Joan cries in the arms of her loving creator, represented by Old Lady God.

"Common Thread"

The twenty-first episode of season two turns out to be the next-to-last episode of the entire series. In the beginning of the episode, Joan takes up knitting at God's request.

The scarf becomes a metaphor for the connections in Joan's life. The various God characters in the episode refer to it to help Joan understand their perspective on connection. Old Lady God is the second God character to reference the metaphor when she visits Joan at the bookstore and finds her knitting.

Joan: Are you going to give me a sticker that says, "inspected by God?"

Old Lady God: Just admiring.

Joan: Yeah, well, I really messed up this part. I dropped a stitch and purlled when when I should've knitted.

Old Lady God: It's hard starting over, isn't it?

Joan: Yeah, but the book said it's okay to drop a stitch every now and then.

Old Lady God: Well, it's the imperfections that make it unique.

Joan: Then I'm definitely unique.

Old Lady God: The Persians make the most beautiful rugs in the world, not that I play favorites. But on each rug, no matter how intricate and exquisite, the artist makes sure there's some small defect. It's called a Persian Flaw. It's a recognition that perfection exists only in me, an acceptance that life can never really be lived exactly the way you expect. I love the colors. Nice.

[Old Lady God then moves to the back of the store to browse, while Joan consults the knitting book.]

This short scene reinforces several attributes of Old Lady God. First of all, she is checking in on Joan with the knowledge that Joan is still struggling with Adam's

betrayal. It is fitting that the God character who originally consoled her after Adam's confession continues contact with her. Second, Old Lady God admires the colors and design of the scarf, which follows her trait of valuing beauty. Third, Old Lady God takes the opportunity to encourage Joan in her work, just like a grandmother taking pride in her grandchildren's hobbies and accomplishments. Finally, Old Lady God shares theological truths in narrative form. Old Lady God uses the explanation of the Persian Flaw to affirm that there is still beauty in imperfection, which means that Joan's life can still have beauty in it, in spite of the betrayal. The Persian Flaw also affirms that God is the only perfect being.

Throughout all of her scenes, Old Lady God presents a personality that is both consistent with the other God characters and markedly different. Like the others, Old Lady God upholds the ideals of creation, purpose, and free will. Like Cute Boy God and Little Girl God, Old Lady God teases Joan, but it is from the perspective of an intelligent parent who knows which buttons get the right responses from the child. Old Lady God also follows Schrader, like the other two, by not answering Joan's questions. However, when she does offer advice or explanation, it is more concrete and explicit than the responses of either Cute Boy God or Little Girl God, while still lacking the glowing lights or angelic choral interludes of Touched By An Angel.

Old Lady God is warm and caring. She exudes a grandmotherly charm, and Joan responds more favorably to visits from Old Lady God than any of the others. Her identity as a nurturer and caregiver is even extended through metaphorical artifacts of her costumes, props, and actions. For example, she wears a homemade Soccer support badge

when she works the bake sale at the high school. She is also a candy striper, volunteering to help the sick. She even cares for the birds by feeding them in the park.

Her existence in the park also coincides with her appreciation of beauty. More so than any of the previous recurring God characters, Old Lady God appreciates beauty. She first speaks of valuing “beauty and purpose” in “The Boat.” In “Out of Sight,” she references Henry David Thoreau, who wrote about the virtues of nature. In “Independence Day,” she encourages Joan to feed the birds, too, and “Common Thread” finds her praising the beauty of the creations of both Joan and the Persians.

Old Lady God is also a storyteller, unlike her counterparts. She shares the myth of Demeter and Persephone in “Independence Day” and the story behind the Persian Flaw in “Common Thread.” Hers is a voice that grandchildren would welcome at bedtime. Even her descriptions of characters and situations within the show have a narrative quality, unlike Little Girl God’s philosophical treatises or Cute Boy God’s witty one-liners.

Finally, Old Lady God is the God Joan cries with. While there are other God characters who see Joan cry, Old Lady God is the one who offers her comfort. This relationship is consistent with the conceit of the show claiming that Joan sees God as she wishes to. So, naturally, the God of comfort would look the same in various episodes. Old Lady God holds Joan when she cries on multiple occasions. Joan shows anger toward Cute Boy God when she feels pain. She shows confusion to Little Girl God when she is troubled. However, Joan draws close Old Lady God when she needs comfort.

Chapter Five: Goth Kid God

First Encounter: "The Uncertainty Principle"

The eleventh episode of season one begins with Joan trying to stop Ramsey from punching Adam until a principal arrives to end the conflict. While sitting in line for questioning at the principal's office, Joan sits next to an eclectically dressed student. The boy has spiky dark purple-tinged hair, black lipstick, dark eye makeup, black nail polish and multiple piercings. He wears a decorative row of safety pins stuck in his short-sleeved black T-shirt over a long-sleeved black fishnet shirt with red plaid pants. His style follows the "Goth" trend¹, which is a popular fringe style in American high schools. He hands Joan a flyer advertising the semi-formal dance.

Joan: Crystal Ball. Cool. Are you going?

Goth Kid: No. You are.

Joan: [Realizing he is God.] Hmmph! I hope you have a date for me in your magic bag.

Ramsey: [Coming out of the inner office and exiting into the hall.] We should do this more often Price.

Principal Price: This is your last chance, Mr. Ramsey.

Goth Kid God: [Indicating Ramsey.] I want you to go with him.

Joan: What? No way. Please. You always said I have a choice.

Goth Kid God: You do. But if you're going to do this, you have to do it right now.

¹ For further discussion of the "Goth" style and subculture, see Derek R. Sweet's article in *Popular Communication*, "More Than Goth: The Rhetorical Reclamation of the Subcultural Self" (3.4, 2005, 239-264).

Joan: Or what?

[Goth Kid God raises his eyebrow in response. Joan exits in pursuit of Ramsey.]

This is perhaps the shortest opening act conversation Joan has with one of the four principal recurring God characters. Goth Kid God makes a later appearance than the others, nearly halfway through the first season, and his appearance is also more dramatic. Therefore, Joan does not need as much explanation as in previous episodes. It is also possible that Joan may not have accepted a message from God in this guise earlier in the series. Still, Goth Kid God's shortness of speech may also stem from his distinct personality. He does not announce his identity or reveal any of Joan's secret thoughts to prove his omniscience. Instead, he simply tells her she is going to the dance. While acknowledging Joan's free will and its place in her decision, Goth Kid God aggressively gets to the point, so Joan is motivated to act. She immediately follows God's directions and secures a date with Ramsey to The Crystal Ball.

Later in the episode, Goth Kid God enters the library, where Joan is reading a book on self-defense. Like the other God characters, he demonstrates omniscience by speaking about Joan's book before ever seeing it.

Goth Kid God: I wouldn't worry about self-defense.

Joan: Then why the psycho mission? Because, I didn't sign up for martyrdom.

Goth Kid God: Heh! Joan, have I ever endangered you?

Goth Kid God reminds Joan that she is safe with him. Although Joan may at times want God to leave her, or at least leave her alone, she can trust that he will never forsake her.

Joan's faith has been growing up to this point. This mission scares her, though, and she needs reassurance. This dialogue also alludes to the martyrdom of the original Jean d'Arc.

Joan: Well, you never told me to ask evil out on a date before.

[Goth Kid God pulls a book entitled, Lost Souls, out of his knapsack, flipping pages as he speaks. The pages contain grotesque paintings of demonic-looking people.]

Goth Kid God: Evil is not a word to use lightly. It's only the darkest end of a broad spectrum.

Joan: You mean like light?

Goth Kid God: Exactly like light. Nobody is born in total darkness. Most of you live on the grey end of the spectrum: a lie here and there, jealousy, wrath. But you only get to absolute evil by doing one thing after another 'til eventually you're transformed.

Joan: Like...a monster?

As with the previous recurring God characters, Goth Kid God employs the light metaphor to illustrate truth to Joan. The opposite of light is darkness, or evil². First of all, it is important to note that Goth Kid God acknowledges the existence of evil. Since the God of *JOA* is not necessarily the God of any particular religion, viewers should avoid making theological assumptions until the text offers explicit definition of the God of *JOA* and his theology. The fact that Goth Kid God applies metaphors of light and darkness to good

² For further discussion of this topic and how it operates in discourse, see Michael Osborne's Quarterly Journal of Speech article, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The Light-Dark Family" (53, 1967, 115-126.).

and evil, respectively, is nothing new for the series. However, using the spectrum in the metaphor adds the nuance of connectedness. This direct dialogue and metaphor delineate a system where good and evil are fundamentally linked, but with different choices leading to them.

It is also important to note how the God of *JOA* affirms evil as a choice. Goth Kid God's explanation to Joan indicates that evil grows as the manifestation of an individual consistently choosing it. This statement and premise seem to coincide with the God of Christianity, as explained by Paul's epistle to the Romans. Romans 1:28-29 (New International Version) reads:

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity.

This passage seems to link both thematically and theologically to Goth Kid God's comments to Joan. As previous characters have explained, the God of *JOA* gives people free will and does not interfere with their decisions. So, if people continue to choose evil, God does not stop them, but rather allows them to continue in their destructive choices.

Goth Kid God: A monster is a creature with no consciousness. They're extremely rare, but they do exist.

Joan: Have you watched the news? I'm not sure they're so rare.

Goth Kid God: Almost everybody has some light somewhere, and light is always worth fighting for.

Joan: Okay. So, I'm supposed to find Ramsey's light?

Goth Kid God: I just want you to listen and observe. Be present.

Joan: That's it?

[Goth Kid God smiles and exits, leaving Joan with the Lost Souls book.]

Goth Kid God is the first recurring God character to mention any kind of fight to Joan. It is clear that God is using Joan to intervene in a proactive manner, but the fighting motif is new in this episode. Another deviation from the norm is that Goth Kid God seemingly tells Joan exactly what to do. Although still lacking the bullet points or step-by-step instructions Joan always hopes for, Goth Kid God gives her a basic command without the sarcasm of Cute Boy God or the philosophizing of Little Girl God. He gets to the point. Throughout the entire scene, Goth Kid God, played by Jeffrey Licon, is congenial and conversational in his exchange with Joan. This dramatic contrast to his appearance is by design.

In an interview on the DVD of the first season of *JOA*, series creator Barbara Hall discusses Goth Kid God:

One of the reasons he was written that way and cast that way is because it's in an episode where God asks Joan to do something that feels scary to her and makes her feel as if her life might be in danger, and we thought it was a good idea to cast a scary looking character. Although, he's still a kid, and it's all for effect. And that's the idea of God being in the guises that we can't recognize, so that you can take something that looks scary and then you realize that it's God so that it becomes not scary.

Licon's performance helps Hall achieve this contrast. While his character is the most radically unnerving to Joan visually, he is the most direct speaker. Though at times Goth

Kid God interacts with passive aggression and suspicion, Licon nuances the character with a solid sense of friendly sincerity, which Joan can take comfort in. This apparent oxymoron is also consistent with the inspiration for his guise. Teenagers can be easily misunderstood, as many of them mask their relatable humanity with dramatic exterior appearances.

Finally, the book Lost Souls serves as a metaphorical artifact. As a prop, the book seems consistent with something a “Goth” teenager would carry in his or her backpack. As a metaphor, it connects on different layers. Goth Kid God asks Joan to observe Steve Ramsey, which seems repulsive to her; she does not want to look at something so unpleasant. While Goth Kid God discusses this mission with Joan, he flips through pages of the book, perusing paintings of monstrous images. One sequence of paintings shows the decay of a man into a monster, which directly complements the dialogue of the scene. Goth Kid God is neither repulsed nor fascinated by the paintings. Just like Ramsey, he wants to teach Joan not to fear evil, but rather to view it objectively. Goth Kid God wants Joan to look for the potential for light to grow, or redemption. He leaves the book with Joan for her to look through, just like he leaves her with the task of observing Ramsey. By the resolution of the mission, Joan is both scared and protected. Goth Kid God’s mission did frighten Joan, but she learned, once again, that God protects her.

Developing the Relationship in Season One: Joan and Goth Kid God

“Requiem for a Third Grade Ashtray”

In the eighteenth episode of the first season, Joan learns about growing up, as several conflicting responsibilities vie for her attention. The title refers to the fact that Helen, who is, at this point, an art teacher, asks her students to bring childhood artifacts

to class in order to smash them into pieces for personal mosaics. Joan saves her homemade turtle ashtray, Archie, from certain doom by removing him from Helen's box of supplies. Once at school, viewers find Joan accepting Adam's invitation to help with his first art show that evening. When the first school bell rings, Joan meets Goth Kid God in the hallway.

Goth Kid God: You're not in much of a hurry.

Joan: I have study hall, which you know.

Goth Kid God: Right. Followed by lunch.

Joan: Is there something I can help you with? I got the milk.

Goth Kid God: And you think that's enough?

Joan: Some clarity would help here.

Goth Kid God: Who's taking care of Luke today?

Joan: I don't know, his parents?

Goth Kid God: Right. You ever thought about maybe sharing some of their burden?

Joan: You know, let's not forget the last time you asked me to share the laundry burden and I ended up on crutches.

[The second school bell rings.]

Goth Kid God: Second bell. It's too late to go to study hall. Look at all this free time.

Joan: I have two exams coming up. Do you want me to flunk?

[Goth Kid God exits.]

Joan: You know, for someone who's almighty, you're very passive aggressive.

This short scene upholds two now-apparent tenets of the God of *JOA*: omniscience and answering questions with more questions. However, it also adds nuance to the particular character of Goth Kid God, which in turn adds to the unified and implied character of the God of *JOA*. In this episode, Goth Kid God's make-up is more prominent. He now wears shades of a pale white base. This is significant beyond wardrobe changes, as it illustrates God's immanent presence and interaction with Joan and her world. The God of *JOA* continually looks different to Joan, hence the variety of God characters. In addition, the recurring God characters also develop and change visually, as Joan's relationship to them develops and changes. Goth Kid God's makeup and wardrobe receive subtle additions throughout the series, as his appearance drifts further from the norm with each frightening assignment he gives Joan.

The dialogue in this scene also reveals a rebellious side of the God of *JOA*, which is aptly demonstrated by Goth Kid God. He is lurking, like a pusher, in the hallway and pressures Joan into skipping class. The context makes all the difference, as viewers know about the character's deity. Thus rebellion, in this context, is acceptable and consistent with a higher calling. It is appropriate for the writers to present such a scenario, beyond just being consistent with an outsider teenage character, such as Goth Kid God. God's instructions, as Joan comes to understand, do not always coincide with the way her society usually operates. Therefore, God can be portrayed as a rebel to social norms. Finally, the scene also includes a connection between Goth Kid God and Old Lady God, as both characters encourage Joan to bear the burdens of others.

Throughout the episode, Joan faces a myriad of stresses, including cooking dinner, running errands, caring for her sick brother, buying fuses for a power outage, helping with Adam's art show, and recovering Luke's notebook in order to send away his Space Camp Application by midnight. The next day at school, Goth Kid God meets Joan.

Joan: Oh, you again. Do you ever show up when I actually need help?

Goth Kid God: You don't need me. You're doing great.

Joan: Oh, okay, and you're here to, what; show me your new nose ring?

Goth Kid God: I want you to pick up some cream of wheat on your way home.

Joan: Cream of what?

Goth Kid God: Cream of wheat. It's got a lot of iron. Luke needs it.

Joan: No, no, no, no. You don't understand. I'm done. Luke gets to put on his spacesuit. Mom got to her meeting, crisis averted. Have a pleasant day. [She walks away and turns around.] You're not going to stop me?

Goth Kid God: It's your choice to walk away. I just think it's interesting that of all the tasks I've given you, buying cream of wheat is the one you're abandoning.

Joan: Because it's endless! It's a black hole of never-ending worries and responsibilities.

Goth Kid God: It's called growing up.

Joan: Oh, well, what if I don't want to?

Goth Kid God: In the brief time we've been talking here, thousands of cells in your body have died and renewed themselves. You're changing all the time. It's how you know you're alive.

Joan: It just seems so scary. [Pauses.] And now here is the part where you reassure me...

Goth Kid God: It is scary. [Goth Kid God unzips Joan's bag, takes out her turtle ashtray, and hands it to her.] Fortunately, you're not alone.

This scene portrays God as one who heals and cares for others, as he encourages Joan to provide Luke with the proper nutrients. It also reveals his friendly nature, as Jeffrey Licon delivers each of Goth Kid God's lines as a congenial peer to Joan. Once again, the God of *JOA* reaffirms free will and demonstrates scientific understanding. His take on death and renewal stands out as unique because of the excitement that flashes across his face when he says, "It's how you know you're alive." He speaks with the fervor of a drug addict praising a drug, and the motif of death is consistent with the darker subjects of his speech in other episodes. It also matches the high school stereotypes associated with his appearance. While Joan is never alone because God is with her, it is interesting that another point is the focus of the scene. By giving Joan the turtle ashtray, Goth Kid God prompts her to offer it to Helen. This small gesture incites Joan to visit her mother and discuss her life as they pound Archie into pieces of a mosaic. Goth Kid God shows both Joan and viewers that the God of *JOA* values human connection, especially within the family.

“Vanity, Thy Name Is Human”

In the twenty-first episode of the first season, God asks Joan to take a cosmetology class for extra credit. Several characters learn lessons in vanity throughout the episode, and Joan's comes through frustration with makeup. Goth Kid God is, appropriately, present in the cosmetology room, applying black lipstick, while Joan struggles with her lip liner.

Joan: What if I don't have any best features?

Goth Kid God: Everyone has a best feature, Joan. I saw to that.

Joan: No, offence, but you've broken, like, every single rule she taught us.

Goth Kid God: The thing to remember is, adornment isn't who you are.

Joan: If you're so worried about me getting caught up in adornment, maybe you shouldn't have sent me to this stupid makeup class.

Goth Kid God: I sent you here to learn, to observe the effects of appearance.

Joan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know, changing the way the world sees me, but the world, i.e. Adam, still doesn't see Zippo.

Goth Kid God: Look in the mirror, Joan, and what do you see?

Joan: Some ridiculous, vain girl who can't stop thinking about shading and concealing. . . This is just not who I am.

Goth Kid God: Exactly.

Since the first episode, the God of *JOA* is trying to help Joan fulfill her true nature, and in this episode Goth Kid God takes up the cause. He reminds her that she is a created being,

uniquely made by him. Joan's identity is not wrapped up in her adornment, and neither is Goth Kid God's. He consistently challenges the stereotypes of his appearance. The mission teaches Joan about herself in reverse. She learns who she is not in order to understand who she is. This is the second episode that Goth Kid God asks Joan to make observation the focus of her mission. He has a lesson to teach, and observation is the way she will learn it.

"Silence"

As previously stated, I will discuss this episode in a later chapter, combining analyses of all four principle recurring God characters.

Further Integration in Season Two

"Out of Sight"

The second episode of season two begins with a dream sequence involving three of the recurring God characters. I will discuss this segment in a later chapter, since the scene links multiple God characters into one framework.

Once Joan arrives at school, she sees Cute Boy God by his locker and ducks down a hallway to avoid him. Goth Kid God is waiting in the hallway, though, and pursues her.

Joan: I told you I didn't want to see you anymore.

Goth Kid God: I thought that maybe you would change your mind. It seemed like we really connected last time.

Joan: No, we didn't.

Goth Kid God: So, you didn't feel anything?

Joan: [Stops to turn and look at him.] Look, it's over, okay? You're just going to have to adjust to that. Call up a friend and bitch about me on the phone if you need to, but find someone else.

Goth Kid God: I just want...

Joan: No! [She walks away again, as he follows.] I don't want to hear it!

Goth Kid God: Just keep your eyes open, Joan.

Joan: What does that even mean? "Keep your eyes open"? They're already open. See?

Goth Kid God: I know how hard it is being back, reconnecting. You have choices to make.

Joan: Well, I have free will, right?

Goth Kid God: Of course.

Joan: And I'm using it right now! I choose a life without you!

[Joan walks away, leaving Goth Kid God in the middle of the hall.]

It is significant that God is the pursuer in this situation for multiple reasons. He is there to remind Joan of a particular mission, which she resents, but he is not selfishly motivated. The mission could result in saving Judith's life, but God is not only interested in the results. Goth Kid God is pursuing Joan to help her through her difficulties adjusting to life back at home after her summer at rehabilitation camp. Goth Kid God echoes Cute Boy God when he reminds Joan of the feeling she has for God. He knows she is denying her feelings and her conscience. It is important for audiences to see that God does not ever abandon Joan. It is she who walks away.

Midway through the episode, Joan is talking with her therapist on her cellular phone, when she sees Goth Kid God walking down the hall. This episode takes place during the time when Joan is trying to convince herself that God is only a hallucination. Frustrated, Joan walks over to confront Goth Kid God.

Joan: Why can't you understand that you're screwing up my life? I just want to be like everyone else.

Goth Kid God: Do I really have to give you the snowflake speech?

Joan: I just want to go to Judith's party.

Goth Kid God: So go.

Joan: Go?

Goth Kid God: Sure.

This small exchange revisits the tenet of God valuing creation and individuals. No other God characters have spoken with Joan between the two scenes with Goth Kid God. It is as if he has been waiting in the hall for Joan in order to approach her once more. As outlined in previous chapters, the episode ends with Joan reconnecting and reconciling with God, as Judith is receiving medical attention from alcohol poisoning.

"Game Theory"

The twelfth episode of the second season begins with Joan and Adam discussing plans for college. Joan is convinced she does not have the intelligence or skills to graduate from a four-year university. Adam disagrees but still walks Joan to a workshop on alternatives to college presented by the school guidance counselor, Mr. Dana Tuchman, played by Kevin Rahm. When Joan enters the room, she notices Goth Kid God is also attending the workshop.

Goth Kid God: Hi, Joan. Have a seat.

Joan: I always knew God was an underachiever.

[The scene cuts to the opening credits and it resumes after a commercial break.]

Mr. Tuchman: Good morning, dregs of society. I will be your guide through the narrow alleyways of alternative achievement. If anyone understands what that means, it's an Ivy League educated man who works for the public school system, which brings us to lesson number one.

Don't be bitter.

Joan: [To Goth Kid God.] So, you're going to tell me why you're here?

Goth Kid God: It's a guidance session. I'm all about guidance.

Joan: Well, maybe if you were a little more specific.

Goth Kid God: Yeah, but you didn't like it when I told you what to do.

Joan: I like it less when you don't.

Mr. Tuchman: [Interrupting them.] Sorry. Can I get in on this?

Joan: Sorry. We're just being rude. Continue.

[Mr. Tuchman continues to lecture, while the students pay no attention.

Joan comments on Mr. Tuchman's speech to Goth Kid God.]

Joan: Hey, that is kind of true, isn't it? I mean, guidance counselors can't lie, right?

Goth Kid God: Guidance comes in many forms, Joan. It can point you in a lot of different directions. You have to develop a little bit of discernment.

Mr. Tuchman: [To Joan and Goth Kid God.] Okay. Now you're just starting to piss me off.

[Goth Kid God exits the classroom.]

Playing the role of the instigator, Goth Kid God gets Joan in trouble. His mischief puts Joan on the spot, which forces Joan to pay closer attention to the situation. It is appropriate for Goth Kid God to be the God character that encourages Joan to develop discernment. After all, he is arguably the scariest God character Joan encounters. Goth Kid God is a walking reminder of discernment. Joan uses discernment by talking to Goth Kid God in the first place, as she is initially repulsed by his appearance. The teenage Goth subculture often carries negative connotations for those outside the subculture. Joan has to learn to approach the person of Goth Kid God and ignore her initial impression, which is based on a stereotype. After the session, Goth Kid God resumes his discussion with Joan in the hall.

Goth Kid God: Design. I like it. I put it everywhere.

Joan: Aren't you perfect?

Goth Kid God: I have a specific assignment for you, since you miss them so much.

Joan: Okay.

Goth Kid God: Go with Adam tomorrow. Take a look at college.

Joan: Wait. Now you want me to go to college?

Goth Kid God: Informed choices. They're better than the other kind.

Besides, you already told him you'd go, and I like follow-through.

Joan: Well, I like privacy. Now that we're listing what we like: privacy and autonomy! I just used "autonomy" in a sentence.

In this scene, Goth Kid God reminds Joan of his role as the Creator-God by discussing his value of design. His comment about liking follow-through also illustrates how the God of *JOA* values commitment. Goth Kid God's comment about informed choices is significant to the theological construct of *JOA*. While each God character encourages Joan to respond to divine requests with faith and obedience, Goth Kid God reminds Joan that he expects her to use her brain. Goth Kid God values Joan's reasoning, as well as her faith in him. Goth Kid God seems to put Joan in situations where observation is the key to her gaining understanding, just like in "The Uncertainty Principle," "Vanity, Thy Name is Human," and "Out of Sight." It seems appropriate for Goth Kid God to be the God character who reinforces the importance of observation, as it complements his particular human guise. A student who acts as a loner or outsider may be more attuned to watching others, as the student is less involved in interpersonal interaction. Also, students who fashion appearances that deviate from the norms of their society may pay closer attention to the reactions of others, as their appearances generate more dramatic feedback from others than students following norms.

Through the course of the episode, Joan learns that she has an instinctive affinity for winning the game Rock Paper Scissors. She also decides to try studying in a four-year university, instead of doubting herself. The game becomes a metaphor for Joan playing the game of life, and this metaphor develops through a conversation with Chess Master God midway through the episode. Joan learns to try, instead of letting others make her decisions. One of the final scenes of the episode features a showdown between

Joan and Luke, who has devised a mathematical formula for Rock Paper Scissors. A circle of students forms around Joan and Luke as they battle through the game, and Goth Kid God is one of the bystanders. His presence at the showdown shows his support for Joan and her decision, as he quietly cheers her on. Though Luke ultimately wins after several rounds, Joan leaves reassured that she should be “in the game” with God on her side.

“Independence Day”

As previously mentioned, “Independence Day” finds Joan sneaking out to an overnight rock festival with Adam, which challenges her relationship with her mother. Before the disobedience, Joan asks her mother’s permission to go, and Goth Kid God is the instigator. The scene begins as Goth Kid God leaves Helen’s class with a piece of artwork. He is the first God character in the episode and acts as the instigator for the plot.

Joan: I should’ve known.

Goth Kid God: Your mom’s in there all by herself. Perfect timing, Joan.

Joan: Look, it’s just a rock concert. I mean, God dresses like that and doesn’t like rock?

Goth Kid God: I love all music.

In thirty seconds or less, Goth Kid God has affirmed both visual and musical art. While perhaps a minor point of theology, many churches disagree on issues of music and art. The God of *JOA*, in this scene, endorses both.

Joan: So...so you think I should go?

Goth Kid God: The choices in your life are yours. You know that.

Joan: Parents don’t.

Goth Kid God: They feel responsible.

Joan: Yeah, but I have to make my own decisions, right? That's the whole free will thing.

Goth Kid God: You can't let your life be defined by other people.

Joan: And my mom is cool.

Goth Kid God: You two have a very special relationship.

Joan: Yeah, we do. You know something? You're pretty cool right now yourself.

[Joan turns the corner, gets nervous, then returns to Goth Kid God again.]

Joan: Uh, does she know you're cool with this?

[Goth Kid God leaves with a backwards wave.]

This interchange between Goth Kid God and Joan brings out God's mischievous side. He knows that Joan knows she is justifying her actions and plays along. None of his words are untrue, but Joan takes them to mean what she wishes. He is congenial in the scene, as well as a bit of a troublemaker. His backwards wave seems to say, "I'll see you soon, Joan, because it looks like you'll be needing me." This particular attribute of Goth Kid God implies that God's plans may fool with the plans of man, but the end result is the correct one.

"Secret Service"

In the eighteenth episode of season two, Joan begins by telling Adam of a strange dream she had, in which he became a dog. On their way to school, Goth Kid God approaches Joan.

Goth Kid God: Hello, Joan.

Joan: Oh. So, you're God. Why don't you tell me why I just turned Adam into a dog. Is it because he's faithful and loyal or because he just ran off?

Goth Kid God: Sometimes a dog is just a dog.

Goth Kid God is matter-of-fact, as usual, as he reminds Joan not to psychoanalyze everything. Yes, the God of *JOA* sometimes speaks in dreams, but dreams are also just dreams. This demonstrates God's practical immanence, while other dreams in the series demonstrate his mysterious transcendence. They continue:

[Some teenagers run by, nearly running over Joan.]

Joan: Could you exert a little control over your creations?

Goth Kid God: Flocks of birds, packs of dogs, you know, people. Once they gather, things happen. I don't interfere. It's part of the rules.

[The teenagers throw eggs at Principal Price's car.]

Joan: Oh, my God. Look at that. That's Price's car.

[The teenagers make noise, run past Joan, throw an empty egg carton at the trash can, but miss.]

Goth Kid God: That's a mess. Someone could slip and get hurt.

Joan: I get it.

[Joan bends down and picks up the egg carton to throw it away. Goth Kid God leaves with a backwards wave, and Principal Price runs out from the building.]

Principal Price: Joan Girardi!

Joan: Mr. Price, I...This is not what it looks like.

Goth Kid God was the instigator once again. His smile connotes mischief, and Joan does not find it fair to be framed. In the short scene, viewers see a God who orchestrates events according to a particular order. Both God's foreknowledge and planning helped set up this scenario. It is fitting for God to be present and involved at the scene with the vandals in the guise of a rebellious, outsider teenager. His mischievous smile and backwards wave seem to say, "Have fun, Joan." He enjoys upsetting her world because he knows she will grow stronger and rely on him more. Unbeknownst to Joan, the frame job set in motion by Goth Kid God was a catalyst for reconciling several characters. The act put Joan in the right place at the right time to do the most good, even though she does not realize she is helping others in the process.

"Something Wicked This Way Comes"

The final episode of season two also became the final season of the series. As explained in the chapter on Little Girl God, the episode structure is unique. Like the finale of season one, Helen also dreams about God in the finale of season two. This time, Helen's dream takes place inside the Catholic church, where two clowns are juggling for her entertainment. The balls they are juggling turn to balloons of paint, and the clowns proceed with vandalizing the church. Helen then notices Goth Kid God leaning against a pillar at the end of her pew.

Helen: Whoa. Should God look weirder than they do?

[Goth Kid God shrugs.]

Helen: Hey, do something.

Goth Kid God: It's not up to me.

[Suddenly a pay phone is standing where Goth Kid God stood, and it begins to ring. Helen answers it, as the scene changes to Will and Helen's bedroom. Will answers the phone on the nightstand.]

This is the second dream in which Helen has seen God in a guise that is familiar to Joan. The storyline reveals that Helen has dreamt about vandalism that actually took place in Father Ken's sanctuary. This shows that the God of *JOA*, even though he appears in a variety of guises, is one God. Helen does not see new versions of God tailor-made to her own preferences. Instead, she sees the same God characters as Joan. Goth Kid God's appearance in the dream shows that he is present and aware of the situation, but the responsibility for action is something he gives to people.

At the end of the episode, Joan suspects Ryan Miller as being responsible for the vandalism of the Catholic church, as well as the arson of Grace's synagogue. Ryan confesses to Joan that he also talks to God, but he does not follow God's instructions. Ryan, instead, tries to undermine the divine plans. The episode, as well as the series, ends with one final visit from Goth Kid God.

Joan: Okay, God. So what's the message here? Ryan is the adversary?

Goth Kid God: I told you before. He's a connection.

Joan: He's evil.

Goth Kid God: Connections are mostly neutral, Joan. Ryan is human, and every human, by virtue of free will, has the choice of how to direct his actions, for good or evil.

Joan: Yeah. He's made it clear how he's directing his.

Goth Kid God: He saved Adam. He got him a job.

Joan: He trashed churches and burned down a synagogue.

Goth Kid God: The universe is kinetic, Joan. Every day, you have to make a choice. Make it better or worse. Most people do a little bit of both, and there are those powerful enough to overbalance the scales on either end.

Joan: So is this fancy talk for “you expect me to save the world?”

Goth Kid God: Counterbalance is a better word.

Joan: You want me to fight back?

Goth Kid God: I expect you to fulfill your true nature, same as it ever was.

Joan: I really don't think I'm up to this.

Goth Kid God: I think you are or else you wouldn't have met him.

Joan: This is seriously going to cut into my normal high school routine.

Goth Kid God: You never liked high school that much.

Joan: If you want me to do this, I get it, but I can't do it alone. My own father doesn't believe me. My ex-boyfriend is siding with the devil. I have no weapons. Other people who have fought back, you know, the other Joan, she had an army. Okay? I don't have anything like that.

Where's my army?

[Goth Kid God directs Joan's attention to her friends seated on the steps.]

Joan: Yeah. So, basically I'm on my own.

Goth Kid God: You have everything you need, Joan.

[Goth Kid God exits with a low backwards wave. Ryan Hunter walks past Joan, staring at her. The scene and series fade to black.]

This final scene reiterates several of the attributes of both Goth Kid God and the overall God of *JOA*. In the scene, Goth Kid God smiles. In the face of evil and dismay, he offers Joan a reassuring smile, and even a joke. He also reminds her that all people have free will to do right or wrong. This means that Ryan has the capacity to choose right, if he wishes. Goth Kid God reminds Joan that she is perfectly equipped for her task. She has an “army” of friends, but more importantly, she has the knowledge and faith that God is on her side at all costs. She can trust God to give her what she needs, when she needs it. Joan’s final conversation with God also echoes back to her first, as Goth Kid God reminds her, “I expect you to fulfill your true nature, same as it ever was.” Once again, God’s plan for Joan is prepared. All she must do is obediently walk in it. The final backwards wave of the series is lower than the rest. It is almost casual. When it seems like Joan’s task is the most dramatic, Goth Kid God assures her she has everything she needs in the most matter-of-fact way possible. He does not respond to the situation with fear or nervousness. The backwards wave seems to say, “Joan, you’ll be fine.” The message is simple.

It is appropriate that the Goth Kid God is the God character that sets Joan off on her newest and greatest challenge. First of all, this is her most scary task yet. So far, Goth Kid God always shows up when Joan is scared, whether it is the fear of growing up, the fear of physical harm, or the fear of losing a friend. Ryan is her first blatant adversary, so her fear brings Goth Kid God into her path.

Secondly, Goth Kid God is the God character that gets to the point. Cute Boy God's charm will not assure Joan right now. Little Girl God has already philosophized. Old Lady God has no situation to console or stories to tell. Goth Kid God acknowledges fear as a true force, as evidenced by his dialogue in "Requiem for a Third Grade Ashtray." So, his presence here is reassuring. He talks with Joan as a frank friend. She has come to trust the frightening-looking Goth Kid God. Now, he asks her to extend this trust to her ability to meet the coming challenges. His hair is spikier than ever, and his "Goth" makeup is paler. However, he is her friend and encourager. There is no mischief about him today. He is there to be truthful with Joan, minus confusing rhetoric, and his truth carries hope. As with the others, the audience's knowledge of the character's deity allows for the commonplace to be transcended, and divinity approached.

Chapter Six: The God of *JOA*

God is One

Thus far, the focus of this study has been to understand the differing personalities of the four principle recurring God characters in *JOA*. Tracing Joan's interaction with each principle recurring God character over the show's two seasons allows the dialogue and story arcs to illustrate particular nuances of interaction. For example, Joan develops a love/hate relationship with the God character she views as most like herself, Cute Boy God. Since his guise is that of a teenage boy, it is easy for Joan to be alternately charmed or angered by his words and actions. Joan learns to respect with mystery the philosophical musings of Little Girl God. She plays hide-and-seek with the character, as one is always approaching the other. Little Girl God wins Joan over with her cuteness, even though her childlike mischief can sometimes annoy Joan. Joan's growing trust is illustrated through Joan showing reverence to a six-year-old. Old Lady God becomes Joan's comforter and confidante. Joan trusts the nurturing Old Lady God enough to cry with her. Goth Kid God initially scares Joan, but she learns to trust him over time. He is both a mischievous instigator and a smiling outsider friend.

The thrust behind such detailed readings of the four characters' chronological scenes is to understand the developing relationship of Joan to another character, the overall unified God of *JOA*. Each recurring God character shares some semblance of similarity to the others, which suggests that these consistent traits may be applied to the unified God of *JOA*. The differences between the recurring God characters may be viewed as different facets of the God of *JOA*'s personality. There are two episodes that include the recurring God characters in shared scenes, which indicate that they are all part

of one whole. The characters can be evaluated both individually and together under the constructs of Crossan's myth and parable and Schrader's transcendental style.

Additionally, while there are particular metaphorical artifacts that inform viewers about each recurring God character, there are also metaphors that are shared by the recurring God characters. These shared metaphors suggest characteristics of the overall God of *JOA*, just like the shared subjects of conversation, as evidenced in the transcripts.

“Silence”

JOA's first season finale is structured around a pivotal plot cliffhanger. The episode finds Joan in the hospital, diagnosed with Lyme disease. She awakes in the hospital bed to find Little Girl God at the foot of her bed and Newscaster God, played by Roark Critchlow, on the television.

Little Girl God: Feeling better, Joan?

Joan: I feel like I got hit by a hummer.

Newscaster God: That's an appropriate analogy.

Little Girl God: Drink some water.

Old Lady God: [Enters, offering Joan a glass of water.] Here you go, dear.

Joan: [Pointing at each God character.] You're here. You're here.

You're on TV. How can you all be here?

[Old Lady God pulls the hospital room curtain back to reveal Chess Master God, played by John Marshall Jones, and Goth Kid God.]

Chess Master God: Life's a paradox. It's about holding two opposing ideas in your head. Such as: It's only a game, but it's the only game.

Joan: Save it, Lord of the Rings. What's wrong with me?

Newscaster God: You're experiencing a fluctuation in the market.

Little Girl God: You're having a crisis of faith.

Goth Kid God: Dark night of the soul.

Old Lady God: Plus, you're very dehydrated.

Joan: I am so not signed up for this. How – how can you all be here at once?

Goth Kid God: How could we ever have been here, Joan? Maybe that's the question.

Joan: Are you saying I imagined you?

Old Lady God: You've always had a great imagination.

Joan: Is – is – is that what's happening to me? Am I sick? Is that it? Tell me.

[All the God characters respond with silence and stares.]

Why aren't you saying anything anymore?

[The scene cuts to a sub-plot, then back to Joan's hospital room.]

Joan: What's the big idea? Walking around minding my own business, you introduced yourself, started dropping in like a bad boyfriend. I do everything that you ask. I – I – I embarrass myself and humiliate myself in really creative ways. I don't have sex, which I easily could have. I do all of this just to make you happy, even though before we met, I didn't even believe in you. And what's my reward? Warts. Barfing. A fever. And now...silence. Give me something, if you don't mind!

[Once again, the scene cuts to a sub-plot, then back to Joan.]

Joan: So this is how it is. Fine, I can sit here all day, too. I never liked any of you. [Points at Goth Kid God.] Especially you. Go on. Just leave! Dump me like Adam did! Please go!

[All of the God characters exit the room.]

Joan: Wait. Are you really leaving? You can't just abandon people.

The episode concludes with Joan telling Will and Helen that God is not real. However, when she falls asleep, Cute Boy God enters the hospital room, tucks her in, and touches her head.

"Silence" introduces a parallel to the legend of Joan of Arc when it opens up the possibility that Joan may be imagining her conversations with God. This sets up a plot for the summer off-season and a new paradigm for beginning the second season. Joan spends her summer at what she refers to as "crazy camp" in order to help her stop seeing God. When she returns to Arcadia, though, she learns she is not crazy because God continues to show up.

"Silence" is a crucial episode to understanding the God of *JOA*. Each God character speaks a line that resonates with his or her individual personality. Little Girl God explains Joan's situation in both simple and theological terms. Old Lady God nurtures Joan by offering her a drink of water and praising her imagination. Goth Kid God references darkness and passive aggressively offers Joan a bit of doubt as a challenge for her to overcome. Chess Master God, who also appeared in the third episode, "Touch Move," speaks in metaphor, as he did before. Newscaster God, who debuted in "The Fire and the Wood," offers commentary that sounds suitable for a news

desk. While their comments are quite different from each other, they all help both Joan and viewers better understand the situation at hand. While their words are different, their actions are all the same. All of the God characters are silent at the same time, and they all leave together when Joan asks them to leave. Visually, this episode illustrates the unity of the God of *JOA*. More so than any other episode, "Silence" suggests that the God of *JOA* is one God with many faces. The continuity between the characters' actions indicates a consistent holistic God with different facets to his personality, not a pantheon of distinct gods.

Dream Sequence in "Out of Sight"

The second episode of season two begins with a dream sequence, in which Joan sees God in three of his recurring guises. Cute Boy God unravels a long scroll of duties for Joan to complete, but she escapes to the breakfast table. Once there, Goth Kid God lies miniaturized and perched on the rim of her cereal, which Joan decides to smash. Then, Helen's appearance transforms into the appearance of Old Lady God, while her voice stays the same. Joan then runs out of the house to meet Adam in the front yard. She hugs him from behind, but when he turns around, he is no longer Adam. Cute Boy God stands in his place. Finally, Joan tries to escape via car and speeds down her street until she notices Old Lady God crossing it. After a moment's deliberation, Joan presses down on the acceleration pedal. She wakes up at the moment her car would have hit Old Lady God.

The unity of the God of *JOA* is expressed through the interchangeability of the characters in Joan's dream. She tries to get away from all three of them. Though this is a dream sequence and, therefore, morphing characters may be considered more common,

the scene still attests to God's unity. Joan has the same feelings for all of the God characters in this scene, which is a contrast to the way Joan feels in the scenes she shares with each of the God characters one-on-one. Although Joan is usually relieved to see Old Lady God, the dream sequence shows Joan treating Old Lady God with the same contempt she usually reserves for Cute Boy God or Goth Kid God. This is the last episode of the series to include a scene involving multiple recurring God characters.

One in Myth, One in Parable

In The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story, John Dominic Crossan outlines the differences he perceives between myth and parable. According to Crossan, "Myth establishes world...parable subverts world" (59). Crossan explains how myth is comforting, as it affirms suppositions and gives definition to the world, whereas parable challenges and changes such suppositions and definitions. His theological approach to story may be applied to God in *JOA* on multiple levels. On the one hand, the God of *JOA* is the God of myth because he establishes the world. For example, Cute Boy God acts as the God of myth in the pilot episode when he establishes the rules and groundwork for his interaction with Joan. His exposition-rich conversations with Joan clue both Joan and viewers into the show's conceit. So, from a plot perspective, he is establishing the mythic world of *JOA*. Conversely, Cute Boy God is also the God of parable because he is subverting the world Joan thought she knew. In the world she was comfortable with, God did not give her missions and backwards waves. So, Cute Boy God destroys the world Joan thought she navigated and establishes another. Under the parabolic structure, Joan learns to constantly reexamine her world as one where God and his providence are the motivating forces.

Crossan says, "A myth creates reconciliation for irreconcilables" (55). He also suggests that parables "create irreconciliation where before there was reconciliation" (55). The God of *JOA*, then, is a teller of both myths and parables. For example, it is mythic for Joan to see God in a human guise. It is a device that serves to reconcile two irreconcilables. In the pilot episode, Cute Boy God explains to Joan, "I don't look like this. I don't look like anything you'd recognize...I'm beyond your experience...I take this form because you're comfortable with it. It makes sense to you." Here, he is establishing the myth that will help Joan operate under her relationship to him. To follow Crossan's theory, the Incarnation is, therefore, mythic in nature. This does not mean that it is untrue by any means, but its story follows the tenets of myth to establish the world by reconciling two irreconcilables. So, any plot devices set up by God may follow the structure of myth, as they establish new ground rules for Joan's perception.

Parables, however, are more frequent in the *JOA* narrative. Little Girl God, for example, is most often the God of parable. She subverts Joan's world through philosophizing and leads her to a newer and truer understanding of life. For example, "Death Be Not Whatever" includes a scene where Joan asks Little Girl God about "extra points." Little Girl God says, "It isn't a point system Joan. You don't get coupons." This explanation undoes Joan's previous understanding of the world. If the world were based on works, Joan could expect some sort of prize from God for each of the people she helps. Instead, God tells her the universe does not operate under her assumed system. Little Girl God also subverts Joan's world by explaining miracles in "The Fire and the Wood." Miracles do happen, but they happen "within the rules" of the natural universe. Joan's expectations for bargained supernatural wonders are incorrect, as Little Girl God

explains. Finally, Little Girl God references the epitome of parabolic structure when she explains the storybook metaphors of redemption in "Romancing the Joan." Little Girl God says, "The illusion dies so something deeper can take its place." In other words, the illusory myth is broken, and deeper meaning is understood.

Old Lady God, as the primary storyteller among the four, tells Joan both myths and parables. Crossan makes it clear that his definition of myth does not necessarily involve gods and goddesses (48). However, his construct can still inform Greek myths, like the myth of Persephone and Demeter, which Old Lady God shares with Joan in "Independence Day." In Joan's mind, her desire for independence backfires because it makes her feel alone. She cannot understand how the two seemingly opposite ideals of independence and connectedness can coexist. In response, Old Lady God shares the Greek myth that gives both ideals equal value. When Adam betrays Joan in "Trial and Error," Old Lady God encourages Joan to hold onto the hope she has. She says, "Innocence...is having the faith that there's goodness in the face of cruelty and pain. Someplace, you still feel that way." This means that Joan follows the myth of faith, which reconciles goodness and pain. This means that faith establishes Joan's world. It is fitting for Old Lady God to describe faith in a way that follows Crossan's structure of myth because having faith is not always viewed as rational by the world, and that is part of its beauty. The story of the Persian Flaw and the metaphor of the thread in Joan's scarf, however, are parabolic in "Common Thread." Old Lady God shares with Joan how imperfections can be beautiful and worth celebrating. This completely subverts the myth society reinforces to Joan, which places value on surface perfection apart from human flaw. This societal myth tries to reconcile two irreconcilables: mankind and perfection.

Crossan is quick to point out that myth and parable are not opposites. A myth can exist without a parable, but a parable cannot exist without a myth. He says, "A parable is not an antimyth...it is a story deliberately calculated to show the limitations of myth, to shatter [the] world so that its relativity becomes apparent...it does not replace one myth with another" (60). Likewise, Goth Kid God does not replace myths for Joan. Instead, he subverts her world to bring her to truth. More so than the other God characters, Goth Kid God may be viewed as a walking parable. He subverts stereotypes often. First of all, his character and guidance as God subvert the negative stereotypes that accompany his appearance. The fact that Goth Kid God acts as a meddling instigator in "The Uncertainty Principle," "Independence Day," and "Secret Service" also follows a parabolic theme. As both the God who dresses like a rebel and the God who appears when Joan is afraid, it is only appropriate that most scenes with Goth Kid God break the expectations of both Joan and the audience. One notable exception is Goth Kid God's second scene with Joan in "The Uncertainty Principle." When the two are in the library, Goth Kid God reconciles light with darkness in a mythic explanation of the importance of fighting for the light that exists in another individual. In the particular plot, Goth Kid God sets up a myth to help Joan reconcile her notion that Steve Ramsey could not possess some goodness. This fits with Crossan's observation, "...It is not possible to live in parable alone. To live in parable means to dwell in the tension of myth and parable" (60). Therefore, it is appropriate for Goth Kid God, as well as the others, to utilize both structures to speak with Joan. The God of *JOA*, therefore, is a God of both mythic and parabolic characteristics. At once, this God is mythic through his multiplicitous incarnational guises; he is also parabolic by appearing in Joan's world in the first place.

Crossan says, "Myth proposes, parable disposes" (63). This observation is demonstrated by the unified God of *JOA* in the episode "Silence." When Joan has Lyme disease, God shows up in multiple guises, employing both myth and parable. Chess Master God offers the mythic statement, "Life's a paradox. It's about holding two opposing ideas in your head. Such as: It's only a game, but it's the only game." This message proposes an idea to Joan. Then, Goth Kid God disposes by saying, "How could we ever have been here, Joan? Maybe that's the question." He asks Joan a question in order to help her progress in her faith, even though his proposition is wrong. God truly was there all along, as evidenced by Cute Boy God tucking Joan in after she denounces the others and drifts to sleep. On a larger level of both theme and plot, "Silence" acts as a pivotal parabolic lesson. Up to that point, Joan had learned to trust God to give her instruction. Even though God often cuts their conversations short with a backwards wave, she could always expect another visit. This time, though, God responds with complete silence. This subverts the understanding of God that Joan developed over the first season. So, the unified God of *JOA* is a God who both exists and speaks from within the tension between parable and myth.

One in Transcendence

In Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer, Paul Schrader states, "In cinema's unique ability to reproduce the immanent also lies its unique ability to evoke the transcendent" (166). As revealed in earlier chapters, *JOA* portrays its God as both immanent and transcendent. One of the ways the series achieves this is by employing elements of Schrader's transcendental style. Schrader outlines three stages involved in transcendental style: the use of the everyday, a development of disparity, and a

succeeding state of stasis. The motion picture in question portrays a common activity or scenario, which is offset by some element of disparity. Rather than resolve the disparity, though, the characters transcend it by reaching a point of stasis. Schrader explains, “Transcendental style uses precise temporal means – camera angles, dialogue, editing – for predetermined transcendental ends” (3-4). The creative team behind *JOA* seems to have employed temporal means of dialogue, costuming, and properties related to the recurring God characters toward transcendental ends. The comparison is paradoxical as one can posit that Schrader would have been against any portrayal of God onscreen, at least initially. His book gives preference to films that implicitly suggest the divine, rather than attempting to explicitly portray them. The manner in which *JOA*’s creative team chooses to present the God characters, however, seems to follow tenets of Schrader’s transcendental style.

Building upon Jacques Maritain’s definitions from Religion and Culture, and ideas from German aesthetician, Willhelm Worringer, Schrader discusses the differences between abundant and sparse means. He explains:

These [abundant] means are sensual, emotional, humanistic, individualistic. They are characterized by soft lines, realistic portraiture, three-dimensionality, experimentation; they encourage empathy...The sparse means are cold, formalistic, hieratic. They are characterized by abstraction, stylized portraiture, two-dimensionality, rigidity; they encourage respect and appreciation. (155)

On the surface, one might mistakenly equate the recurring God characters with abundant means because they are humanistic and are drawn with human realistic portraiture.

However, the characters represent God. A three-dimensional human can, at best, represent a two-dimensional, mundane version of God. As Cute Boy God says of himself in the pilot episode, "I don't look like anything you'd recognize...I'm beyond your experience." Thus, the creative team behind *JOA*, arguably, uses sparse means to portray God. Ordinary human forms become abstract when they are meant to represent absolute divinity. These sparse means are applied to God's speech, appearance, and artifacts throughout the series, as evidenced by the careful analyses of the four principle recurring God characters.

Cute Boy God exemplifies sparse means as the first God character Joan encounters. He is completely unremarkable. There are no special effects, or abundant means, alerting audiences that Cute Boy God is, in fact, divinity. Of the recurring God characters, Cute Boy God is the most like Joan. He is a white, middle class, casual-dressing student who, like Joan, also rides the city bus. He has a locker just down the hall from Joan's locker. Inside he keeps books and school supplies, instead of magic lights or healing waters. His dialogue also demonstrates transcendental style, as he neglects to answer Joan's questions. Rather than adding further explanation to the disparity interrupting Joan's norm, he skips ahead to the next subject or walks away with a backwards wave, allowing Joan and audiences to reach their own conclusions.

Schrader discusses stasis as the end of a film, but it can also be applied to the end of a scene. He explains, "When the image stops, the viewer keeps going, moving deeper and deeper, one might say, into the image" (161). The same can be said of the conversations Joan has with Cute Boy God that are cut short by his backwards wave. Not explicitly answering questions, paradoxically, emphasizes the answer even more. Not only does it

lead viewers to answers, the practice also engages audiences through an increased level of cognitive interaction with the televised text.

Just like Cute Boy God, Little Girl God also communicates through sparse means. Because she is a child, her artifacts may be more elaborate than Cute Boy God's, while still being considered sparse means. If Cute Boy God wore Little Girl God's giant eyeball headband, the costume piece would not look commonplace. Since Little Girl God is the character that wears the headband, though, the prop can act as a metaphorical artifact suggesting God's omniscience without being considered abundant means. Her blue ball can also be considered sparse means, as it connotes God's control over the world. If the creative team chose to employ abundant means, Little Girl God would potentially be holding a computer-generated miniature earth replete with tiny palm-sized thunderstorms and glowing lights. Also, she neglects to answer many of Joan's questions.

Old Lady God is an example of sparse means only because audiences are aware of her identity as God. Otherwise, her artifacts would not appear symbolic. For example, a grandmother wearing a candy-striper uniform is an everyday scenario. However, when the audience takes into consideration that the character is God, new connections can be made. An everyday element in "Out of Sight" is an old lady in a candy-striper outfit. The disparity, however, is that the old lady is actually God. Rather than delving into a theological explanation of God's role as healer or an added scene of healing a patient through blinding special effects, the scene continues to stasis, which allows viewers to reach their own conclusions about God in the guise of a medical volunteer. Old Lady God sometimes follows the transcendental approach to dialogue and ignores Joan's

questions, just like Cute Boy God and Little Girl God. However, Old Lady God offers more answers than the others. Schrader says, "The more a work of art can successfully incorporate sparse means within an abundant society, the nearer it approaches its transcendental 'end'" (155). This notion is at work in *JOA*, as each new interaction with God is ripe with unspoken nuances, or dots left open for viewers to connect on their own.

Goth Kid God is the recurring God character that seems to demonstrate transcendental style the least. His appearance is the least commonplace of any of the characters, so it is a more difficult disparity to transcend into stasis. However, this criticism is only partly true. While Goth Kid God may not look like the average American neighbor, like the other recurring God characters could, he does not look out of place at a modern public high school. In fact, there are probably several students dressed similarly to Goth Kid God. Though his costumes may be more of a stretch for transcendence, his artifact, or prop, in "The Uncertainty Principle" is more accessible to the application of transcendental style. Rather than explaining the implied metaphors of the Lost Souls book in detailed conversation, Goth Kid God simply flips through the pages and hands the book to Joan. There is no montage of Steve Ramsey inter-cut and morphing in with the shots of the book's monstrous paintings. This would be abundant means, and would not lead to transcendence. Schrader says, "The sparse means are not ordered toward tangible success but toward the elevation of the spirit" (154). This means the goals are less obvious to the viewer. The viewer is never patronized by sparse means.

Finally, the overall God of *JOA* is presented through a transcendental style. The fact that Joan accepts the appearance of God in human guise is transcendental stasis out of a disparity of the everyday. When God is represented as a unit of guises in both

“Silence” and “Out of Sight,” sparse means are still employed. There is no grand “God-meld” with shape-shifting special effects illustrating the unity of all of the God characters. Instead, it is just a collection of commonly dressed actors playing facets of the unified God’s personality. It is as if *JOA* could be presented in a low budget live theater venue through simple suggestions because lights and special effects never accompany the arrival of God. After all, the theological basis of *JOA* assumes that God is already at work in the everyday details of the world. We should not be surprised by some extravagant entrance or exit because that would imply that God’s presence and interaction in the world is not an everyday fact.

The backwards wave that each of the recurring God characters offers is an appropriate artifact in the transcendental style that corresponds to the characterization of the overall God in *JOA*, as well as the show’s theology. It is not the wave of a fairy godfather, and the exits never involve special effects or angelic lights and voices. The wave is never offered with God facing Joan. This is significant because it is a minor disparity from a common farewell. God never faces Joan to say goodbye, because God never truly leaves Joan. God does not look back. He embodies the forward motion of the entire universe and, therefore, would not look back, just like he always looks forward when Joan leaves him riding the bus. God is in motion and waves back to Joan as a subtle reminder that he is in the lead, guiding and directing everything to work, as it should. Joan can trust a God that goes before her, and his backwards wave is a subtle reminder to follow him. It is evident that the directing team of *JOA* had the God characters downplay both the backwards wave and the drive forward in the city bus. This sparse means of direction allows the gestures to take on greater meaning than some

computer-generated mystical disappearance. After all, "The Boat" includes Old Lady God's statement, "I don't pop. I abide. I am eternal. There's no popping." Such theatrics as popping are contrary to the steady controlled nature of the ultimate being in *JOA*.

On two occasions, *JOA* slips into overuse of abundant means, and the scenes stand out as not fitting with the rest of the series. Both season finales include scenes with added visual effects. In "Silence," the theatrics include two twin girl God characters that meld together into one, a time-stop sequence reminiscent of *The Matrix*, and a flash of evil-color superimposed onto the eyes of Principal Price. In "Something Wicked This Way Comes," computer-generated aura-like light trails surround the ghosts of Judith and Rocky as they walk through walls. All of these effects stand out in a negative way. Schrader explains, "In the transformed order of artistic means the empathetic, dramatic device now seems out of place" (161). The scenes in question are so markedly different from the rest of the series that they momentarily break the suspension of disbelief and turn the viewer's attention to the technical execution of the effects, instead of allowing the viewer to remain wrapped up in the story.

Sparse means and the transcendental style are important to study if they succeed in drawing the viewer closer to divinity. Schrader summarizes the point and distinction of transcendental style by explaining:

The abundant means are indeed tempting to a film-maker, especially if he is bent on proselytizing. With comparative ease he can make an ardent atheist sympathize with the trials and agonies of Christ. But he has not

lifted the viewer to Christ's level, he has brought Christ down to the viewer's. (164)

JOA is successful in raising the viewer toward divinity. Rather than spelling out every neatly packaged answer, *JOA* leaves questions unanswered so viewers may reach their own conclusions. While this study only applies Schrader's transcendental style to understanding the recurring God characters and, subsequently, the character of the overall God of *JOA*, there are traces of transcendental style throughout the entire series. The show succeeds and challenges viewers beyond the capacity of Touched By an Angel or Highway to Heaven because it significantly follows the main stipulations of transcendental style. Like a teacher using the Socratic method of questioning her students to lead them to the truth, *JOA* interjects questions causing disparity into the mundane in order to lead both Joan and viewers to deeper truths. Even though applying transcendental style to human guises of God may initially seem counter to the intuition of the style itself, the comparisons are justified by the sense of transcendence that is effectively passed on to the viewer. Schrader writes, "By rejecting its own potential over a period of time, cinema can create a style of confrontation. It can set the abundant and sparse means face to face in such a way that the latter seem preferable" (164). I believe that by exercising restraint and deliberate aesthetic choices toward sparse means, *JOA* has successfully generated appreciation and desire for sparse means. After all, it is through this form that viewers are elevated to a deeper understanding of divinity. Transcendental style may not have been blatantly utilized in all scenes between Joan and the God of *JOA*, but it certainly helps inform viewers about the nature of *JOA*'s God throughout the series' two seasons.

One Belief, One Character

Though he has many faces, the God of *JOA* is one God, affirming particular theological ideals and personality traits across all of his human guises. The God of *JOA* consistently reminds Joan of both his immanent involvement in the universe and his transcendent nature, which exists beyond Joan's understanding of the natural world. He also reminds Joan that, as the creator-God, he asserts harmony between science and faith. God often refers to the perfect system he created and explains scientific phenomena to Joan. The electromagnetic spectrum is not only a favorite subject as a scientific reality, however. God, in all of his guises, uses light as a metaphor for understanding. Joan can choose to follow and share light in work against darkness. This is because God has created Joan and the rest of mankind with free will. He offers suggestions but never forces human choice. God consistently encourages Joan to "fulfill her true nature." He emphasizes his relationship with her and her personal growth in faith over any specific religious practices. He knows Joan's "true nature" because he is omniscient and reminds Joan of this often. The God of *JOA* is also, most certainly, not the God of any particular religion, even though Joan's family experiences him most directly through Catholicism. Through all of his guises, friendly or frightening, male or female, young or old, the God of *JOA* is one unified character, consistent throughout the entire run of the show. In order to make these connections, it was both necessary and enjoyable to try to understand the particular personalities of the four principle recurring God characters.

God in *JOA* and God in Scripture

Given the above description of the unified character of *JOA*'s God, it may also be useful to compare the God of *JOA* to the God of scripture. The series uses Catholicism as

the viewpoint of departure for discussing God, so it is appropriate to compare the *JOA*'s God with the God of Christianity. However, since the show does not consistently feature discussions of detailed theological systems, dissecting the differences between specific theological systems in Christianity may not be suitable for this particular study. Therefore, comparing basic tenets of the God of evangelical Christianity to attributes of the characterization of God in *JOA* is a more fitting approach.

As previously discussed, the God of *JOA* exhibits the attributes of immanence, transcendence, and omniscience. The God of *JOA* is also the Creator-God who creates, heals, and comforts. All of these characteristics fit with an evangelical Christian understanding of God, as detailed by John S. Feinberg in No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God. Another similarity is the nuanced and debated concept of free will, which Feinberg discusses in the fourth chapter of his book. Even though the issue is a common topic of debate, it exists as a proposition in evangelical Christian theology and serves as another link between Christian theology and the God of *JOA*.

Beyond the parameters of this study, certain portrayals of the God of *JOA* do not coincide with an evangelical Christian understanding of God. For example, the ninth episode of the second season, "No Future," includes representations of God as both a homosexual and a fortuneteller. Both of these characterizations of God go against moral laws outlined in Leviticus chapters 18-20, and are, therefore, incongruous with the God of evangelical Christianity. Additionally, the God of *JOA* supports pluralism, as evidenced by Cute Boy God's conversation with Joan in the pilot episode. This also differs from evangelical Christianity, which maintains that there is only one way to God. Evangelicals cite Biblical passages to support this view, such as I Timothy 2:5-6, which

states, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men – the testimony given in its proper time” (NIV). Beyond failing to assert Christ as the only way for mankind to reach God, the construct of God in *JOA* does not address Christ at all. So, this is a major deviation from the evangelical Christian theology.

Although the conceit of the God of *JOA* does not include direct references or parallels to Christ in its myriad of human guises, the multiple God characters do not necessarily suggest pantheism. This study asserts that the various God characters act as aspects of the personality of one unified God, which also coincides with an evangelical Christian understanding of God. The Bible is filled with a variety of names for God. To quote Cute Boy God in the pilot episode, he “comes off nicer [than the Old Testament] in the New Testament” and is still “the same God.” In scripture, one name for God is insufficient. Likewise, there is no one image of God that will suffice in representing the God of *JOA*. This construct allows *JOA*’s creative team to explore various facets of the God character through multiple incarnations of God in the context of the show. Television can explore issues and relationships of characters over a period of years, whereas a film is limited to the span of a few hours. Therefore, *JOA*’s exploration of God, with nearly ninety God characters over two seasons, may actually come closer to describing the complexities of the multifaceted nature of the God of evangelical Christianity than would be possible in film.

Joan’s Journey with God

Finally, the God of *JOA* is relational. While this is one of the God character’s fundamental qualities, it may easily be overlooked as this character trait is a part of every

scene with Joan. The God of *JOA* cultivates a deep relationship with Joan over the course of two years, and Joan grows personally as a result. The chapters tracing Joan's relationship to the specific God characters offer evidence of Joan's growth along the way. For example, Joan initially rejects Cute Boy God in the pilot episode. By his final appearance in "Dive," Cute Boy God helps Joan face her grief over Judith's death. Joan has become strong, and Cute Boy God has helped bring her to that point. In the case of Little Girl God, Joan begins by listening to philosophizing from the other side of a playground fence. Over time, though, Joan learns to trust Little Girl God enough to allow Little Girl God to both walk her home in "Night Without Stars" and explain the power of romance in "Romancing the Joan." In "The Uncertainty Principle," Joan cries in front of Old Lady God, but she is still somewhat disconnected from the grandmotherly figure. However, Joan's trust in God grows to the point of allowing Old Lady God to hold her as she cries in both "Out of Sight" and "Trial and Error." When Joan first meets Goth Kid God in "The Uncertainty Principle," she is scared and perhaps even repulsed by his appearance. By the final episode, "Something Wicked This Way Comes," Joan allows Goth Kid God to give her encouragement and guidance for confronting the newly introduced antagonist, Ryan Hunter. In the pilot episode Joan says to Cute Boy God, "Don't ever talk to me again." By the end of the series, she is prepared to go to war with Ryan Hunter with God by her side. This transformation is evidence of the power of having a relationship with God, as it both develops Joan's inner strength and tests her faith.

Joan's developing relationship with God also influences the other relationships in her life by helping her to view others in a new light. For example, Joan learns to care for

Luke when he is sick after being spurred on by Goth Kid God in “Requiem for a Third Grade Ashtray.” Both Old Lady God and Goth Kid God help Joan reconnect with her mother in “Independence Day” and understand Steve Ramsey in “The Uncertainty Principle.” Joan learns to relate to Rocky, the terminally-ill boy she babysits in “Death Be Not Whatever,” and both Little Girl God and Cute Boy God help Joan understand her relationship to him. In “Only Connect,” Cute Boy God says to Joan, “I want you to build things...relationship, possibilities, connections.” Joan lives out God’s emphasis on relationships throughout the series as she cultivates relationships with her friends, family, and strangers, all in obedience to God. The relational quality of the God of *JOA* serves as a model to Joan, giving heart to her interactions with others and propelling the plot at the same time. This trait also coincides with the evangelical Christian understanding of God, as Christians emphasize both knowing and being known by God.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions

Although the previous chapter of this research details conclusions about the God of *JOA*, there are still several other significant conclusions suggested by this thesis.

Although God was the primary character of focus for this particular study, Joan is the titular character and protagonist of the series. Comparing her to Joan of Arc is valuable in understanding Joan's role in the series as well as her relationship to God. Since I have consulted the works of other scholars to inform my close reading of the scenes between God and Joan, it is also appropriate to evaluate the effectiveness of my methodology and make suggestions for further study.

Joan Girardi and Joan of Arc

While this study primarily focuses on understanding the character of God in *JOA*, it is significant to note that, with the exception of two scenes with Helen, Joan is the only character who interacts with God. Therefore, it is important to consider, in part, the role Joan plays in the relationship. Preparation for the study included surveying films and articles about the inspiration for the show's title and premise, Joan of Arc, or Jean d'Arc. Comparing *JOA*'s Joan Girardi to cinematic characterizations of Joan of Arc in Luc Besson's The Messenger and Carl Dreyer's The Passion of Joan of Arc yield some fundamental similarities. Joan Girardi and Joan of Arc are common teenage girls who talk to God. Both Joan Girardi and Joan of Arc are accused of hallucinating when they claim to be talking to God. Joan of Arc's story ties her to specific issues with the church. In *JOA*, however, Joan does not believe in God until the first time she speaks with him. Joan Girardi talks to God outside of any church-related contexts. While her family is loosely tied to Catholicism, the institutional church does not play a major role in

her story, unlike the Joan of legend. Additionally, Joan of Arc is a leader engaged in battle. Throughout the first two seasons, Joan Girardi is not a leader. Her character is average both academically and socially. She is never portrayed with remarkable leadership qualities. Since the series was cancelled against the plans of *JOA*'s creative team, it is reasonable to posit that Joan may have grown in her leadership abilities and engaged in some type of "war." The final episode, "Something Wicked This Way Comes," implies that Joan will be required to fight, or "counterbalance," the newly introduced character of Ryan Hunter. It appears as if Joan's battle was to be a focal point of planned future episodes, had the series continued. Joan Girardi compares herself to Joan of Arc in the final episode. Goth Kid God even insinuates that Joan's high school friends will become her "army" in the fight.

Finally, Anna Dickinson's appropriation of Joan of Arc to ideals of the early feminist movement, as outlined in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's "La Pucelle D'Orleans Becomes an American Girl: Anna Dickinson's 'Jeanne D'Arc'," differs dramatically from *JOA*'s appropriation of the Joan of legend. Dickinson used Joan of Arc as a crusader figure to follow; Joan Girardi functions more as an everywoman. While Dickinson challenged people to become like her version of Joan of Arc, the creators of *JOA* do not emphasize Joan Girardi as a role model. Nevertheless, Joan Girardi is worth emulating because God works through Joan's obedience, in spite of her commonness. This line of thought could be pursued further as an application of Schrader's transcendental style. Joan is an everyday character who encounters disparity when God talks with her and reaches a state of stasis by accepting the conversations and following in obedience.

Critique of Methodology

Conducting a close reading of *JOA* proved beneficial to unpacking nuanced meanings in the text. While I had enjoyed watching *JOA* as a casual viewer aside from the study, I did not recognize many of the common thematic threads and attributes of the God character until viewing the series through the close reading lens. Tracing the characters chronologically over the two seasons allowed me to notice patterns in the deepening relationship between the God characters and Joan. I learned to let the text speak for itself without trying to force it into a pre-determined system, and this proved beneficial to understanding a text as complex as *JOA*. The additional tools from Crossan and Schrader also made positive contributions to the study as they enhanced the analyses of the four chronological close readings by character.

Consulting Johan Dominic Crossan's definitions of myth and parable from The Dark Interval: Towards A Theology of Story, proved beneficial to understanding the God of *JOA* for several reasons. Since Crossan applies theology to narrative study, it is appropriate to consult his work when performing a close reading of a text with a spiritual theme, though the validity of his work, as it informs this study, goes beyond any shared, divine subject matter. Crossan's work is especially beneficial to understanding the role of the God character within the series. His definition of myth helped me understand the conceit of the show. According to Crossan, "Myth establishes world...parable subverts world" (59). So, on one level, the myths of *JOA* establish the set-up of the series. The myths of *JOA* function both within individual episodes and throughout the overall seasons and series. Identifying the myths added clarity to my understanding of the role of God in establishing Joan's world.

Identifying parables within the series, according to Crossan's definition, yielded equally important results. While the parables identified in *JOA* also aid in understanding the show's conceit, they most often help explicate the thematic elements of the series. Since the God characters often teach Joan lessons, understanding the use of parable, in relation to the God characters, can build understanding of the themes of both individual episodes and the entire series.

Consulting Crossan's definitions of myth and parable as part of my analysis helped me to frame the conceit of the series in greater detail, especially because Crossan and *JOA* both focus on spiritual themes. Since I conducted a close reading of the motion picture text, it was appropriate to incorporate Crossan's work as it relates to narrative. While Crossan's definitions of myth and parable may be employed to illuminate any narrative, they are not specifically related to film. I believe they helped my particular study because of their theological foundation. They are particularly useful in evaluating spiritual-themed narratives, but their benefit to film study is limited as they do not explicitly address visual elements.

In contrast, Schrader's model of transcendental style proved invaluable and indispensable in understanding the God of *JOA*. Since *JOA* includes transcendental subject matter, Schrader's work was an obvious choice, on the surface. However, one could argue whether or not Schrader would approve of the portrayal of deity in a moving picture in the first place. As mentioned previously, portraying God in film may initially seem to subvert Schrader's ideals, but the application makes sense once the scholar takes a closer look at the way the God character is portrayed.

Consulting Schrader's model of transcendental style served this study well, as it directly colored my understanding of the portrayals of God in the series. Tracing the uses of everyday elements, developments of disparity, and succeeding states of stasis helped me to contextualize Joan's encounters with God. The scenes where Joan learned something as a result of her conversation with God usually included all three of these elements. Every time Joan transcends the development of disparity resulting from God interrupting her everyday life, she reaches a state of stasis. This pattern helped me trace the development of Joan's relationship to God. Thus, the particular elements of transcendental style are helpful in understanding the content of *JOA*.

Schrader's evaluation of sparse means and abundant means in relation to transcendental style also amplified understanding of the God of *JOA*. Minus special effects, God appears in a variety of human forms, and these portrayals employ sparse means to help viewers ponder the divine. So, transcendental style is well-suited to analyzing and understanding both the subject matter and set-up of *JOA*, and this has implications for studying other particular texts as well. Classifying the means of a motion picture text as either sparse or abundant seems to be a valuable practice, as it can inform the scholar's analytical understanding of plot, conceit, characterization, and theme.

Additionally, Schrader's explanation of transcendental style in film enhanced this study because its inherent values work well with close reading and text in context scholarship. As stated previously, Schrader values careful examination of scenes in motion pictures. He takes into consideration both visual and verbal elements of the motion picture text and suggests that universal ideals can be reached by viewing the

particular. His inductive approach is congruous with the aim and application of the method of close reading.

While Schrader's work enlightened my close reading of *JOA*, it also opened the study to new opportunities. The study benefits from using transcendental style, but transcendental style seems underserved. In a sense, the study did not use the model of transcendental style to its full potential. Scholars could potentially study *JOA* through transcendental style alone for satisfactory results. Since this study applies the model to understanding characterization, the characterization benefits. However, transcendental style does not take center stage as it likely could.

In the end, I find the methodology of this study to be satisfactory. The close reading and text in context approach serves the particular case of *JOA* well. Allowing John Dominic Crossan's work to inform my analyses proved useful in understanding the construct of *JOA*'s God. While the insights gained from Crossan are valuable, I do not feel they are essential to understanding every representation of God on film. However, I suggest any scholar studying cinematic portrayals of God to consult Paul Schrader's work on transcendental style in film. Whether one agrees with Schrader's ideals or not, he offers a valuable and reputable rubric for viewing films seeking transcendence. In this particular study the works of Crossan and Schrader made positive contributions without interfering with each other, but Schrader's work proved most applicable to understanding God in film.

Suggestions for Further Study

There are several ways to extend or augment this particular study of the God of *JOA*. This particular study focused on the four principal God characters, but there are

more than eighty-five God characters that appear in the series. Extending the study to incorporate more or all of these characters should be considered. Perhaps extending the study to all recurring God characters would yield a more rounded approach. Categorizing the God characters according to function within the plot may also be helpful. Another possibility for understanding the unified character of the overall God character may be to trace certain themes through each of Joan's scenes with God, regardless of the particular God guise.

Another possibility would be to expand the consideration of Schrader's transcendental style to the entire series. In this study, transcendental style was one tool used to inform the analysis of the particular God characters. Extending this framework to all characters and situations in the show might yield other thematic results. One possibility would be to follow implications in Lisa M. Elliott's article, "Transcendental Television?: A Discussion of *Joan of Arcadia*," and focus specifically on the disparities caused by Kevin's adjustment to life in a wheelchair (7-8). Tracing the everyday, disparity, and stasis elements through Kevin's storyline would offer a transcendental style analysis for, arguably, the first paraplegic principal character on network television.

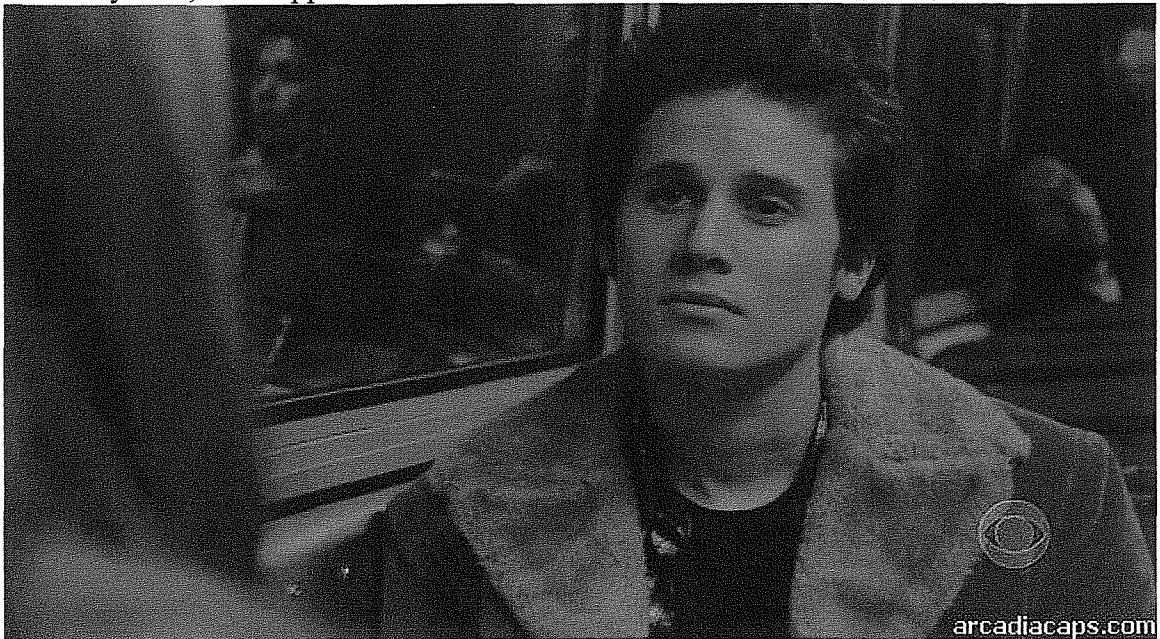
Since *JOA* is a broadcast text, audience analysis is also appropriate. Social science approaches focusing on audience perceptions should be initiated in order to assess the impact of the series, as it addresses both family and spiritual issues. Interviews, focus groups, or surveys may be appropriate. Because *JOA* deals so heavily with spirituality, it would be particularly interesting to note differences in audience response based on religious experience and background.

On a similar plane, incorporating views of researchers from different religious backgrounds into this existing study may present a more thorough view of the text of *JOA*. An agnostic view of the texts could be valuable, as could an atheistic view or the views of researchers with different religious histories. Such a compilation of close readings could prove to be fascinating, since spirituality is so central to this particular text.

Finally, future studies could extend the analysis of *JOA*'s text to its growing wealth of hypertext. More so than ever before, fans are taking opportunities to connect through new media to discuss their favorite television programs, and online communities discussing *JOA* only perpetuate its impact. The literature review cited one particular fan website, however, there are other websites devoted specifically to *JOA*. Searching the blogosphere and online discussions of television would doubtless yield further results. For example, a fan website located at < <http://www.acari.de/joa/index.html> > and entitled, Tales of Arcadia: A Joan of Arcadia Fanfiction Archive, includes stories of *JOA*'s characters submitted by fans of the series who expound upon the storylines of the show's two seasons. The show truly lives beyond the initial texts of its two season, whether or not any future episodes of *JOA* are produced. The fans have identified with Barbara Hall's characters of God, Joan, and the rest of Arcadia's inhabitants, and studying *JOA*'s online presence in audience-generated extensions of the original show's narrative could greatly aid researchers in understanding the show's influence. Such investigations could focus specifically on audience views of the God of *JOA* or the show in general. No matter what studies may follow, *JOA* is a unique and complex text worthy of further investigation.

Appendix:
Screen Images of *JOA*'s Principal Recurring God Characters

Cute Boy God, as he appears in "Death Be Not Whatever."



Little Girl God, as she appears in "The Fire and the Wood."



Old Lady God, as she appears in "Out of Sight."



Goth Kid God, as he appears in "Game Theory."



All images are taken from <<http://www.joanofarcadia.com/index.html>>.

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