

Doubt
by John Patrick Shanley
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A STUDY GUIDE
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THE AUTHOR. Born in the Bronx in 1950, John Patrick Shanley likes to call attention to his urban bad-boy background. In his *Playbill* “bio” for the New York production of *Doubt* he said this about himself:

He was thrown out of St. Helena’s kindergarten. He was banned from St. Anthony’s hot-lunch program for life. He was expelled from Cardinal Spellman High School. He was placed on academic probation by New York University and instructed to appear before a tribunal if he wished to return. When asked why he had been treated in this way by all these institutions, he burst into tears and said he had no idea. Then he went into the United States Marine Corps. He did fine. He’s still doing okay.”

A working-class reprobate, a boat-rocking intellectual, and a Marine, Shanley has written more than a score of plays reflecting this multi-faceted past. In *Italian-American Reconciliation*, for example (produced by the Public Theater in 2000), he examines the perils and poetry of love among gun-toting blue-collar folk from the outer boroughs. By contrast, in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (produced at The Public in 1999), he explores sexual obsession as experienced by well-heeled Manhattanites and their brainy shrinks. And in *Defiance* (2006) he portrays life in the Marine Corps in the 1970s.

Set in a parochial school in the Bronx in the early 1960s, *Doubt* (2004) clearly draws on those childhood experiences Shanley cites in his “bio.”

According to Everett Evans in *The Houston Chronicle*, the playwright’s “years at St. Anthony’s grade school supplied the play’s milieu, right down to the distinctive attire worn by the Sisters of Charity. A fondly remembered teacher inspired the character of Sister James, the impressionable young nun who becomes a pawn in the central conflict.”

The playwright told Broadway World.com's Robert Diamond that, "I've reconnected to my own past in many ways as a result of doing the show. My first grade school teacher, Sister James, who still teaches, has come back and was my guest at my opening night. . . . I've heard from a lot of nuns and clergy who have both liked the play. . . ."

Although the play is rooted in the particulars of the playwright's own past, Shanley wants us to know that he intends *Doubt* to reach far beyond the Bronx in 1964. Explaining the genesis of the play to David Drake at Broadway.com, he recalls that while rehearsing for another show, "just out of the blue, apropos of nothing—I said, 'Think I'm gonna write a play called *Doubt*.' And someone said, 'Well, what's it about?' I said, 'I have no idea.'"

But eventually an idea began to form, coalescing around what Shanley felt to be an objectionable "quality of *certainty* being exercised around me. . . ." To this quality, "something in me was answering with something that felt very powerful called 'doubt.'" Far from seeing doubt as a weakness, Shanley says that it was in fact "a passion to answer this certainty." In fact, he felt that certainty was far less reliably "founded" as an approach to the world than the more tentative, and therefore more trustworthy, attitude of doubt.

Summarizing this process for the *Houston Chronicle*, he declares, "I wanted to write a play embracing doubt. About the merit of doubt as opposed to certainty." Such a project, he acknowledges, runs counter to the human "attraction to absolutes. . . . People want to get everything all settled. . . . But if you want to understand anything about the human experience, it's not about . . . 'the verdict.' How the two adversaries handle their clash is the important thing."

Clearly, this play about a priest accused of sexually exploiting an eighth grade boy is in part a reaction to the sexual scandals that erupted within the American Catholic Church in the years just preceding the play's 2004 opening. But, Shanley tells the *Chronicle*; it was also inspired by "the certainty about weapons of mass destruction (as a rationale for the U.S.'s invasion of Iraq). I kept saying, 'How do they know?' Why are people so accepting of this notion [?]" In the end, though, Shanley insists that "the play is no more about Iraq than it is about the church sex scandals. 'I'm not a topical writer. I'm writing about something unanswered.'" In other words, both the sex scandals and the controversy over weapons of mass destruction were particular instances of what Shanley takes to be a universal proposition: when in doubt, doubt.

Doubt went on to win a number of Tony Awards in 2005, including Best Play. It also won the Pulitzer Prize in drama for that year. These were the first playwriting awards bestowed on the author during a prolific career in theater that spanned three decades. Ironically, his most notable previous accolade was in another medium, film. In 1988 he won the Academy Award for best screenplay for the romantic comedy, *Moonstruck*, starring Cher and Nicholas Cage.

THE PLOT. The play opens in church, at Sunday Mass, with a sermon by Father Flynn, a priest in his late thirties robed in green and gold vestments—the liturgical colors associated with hope and joy. (This is an ironic combination given outcome of the plot.) Fr. Flynn’s homily is on the subject of the play itself: doubt. “There are those of you in church today who know exactly the crisis of faith I describe,” the priest declares. “I want to say to you: Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone.”

With these words, we move to the second of the play’s nine scenes—the office of Sister Aloysius Beauvier, a member of the Sisters of Charity and the principal of St. Nicholas grammar school in the Bronx. Sister Aloysius is receiving a visit from Sister James, a younger member of her order who teaches the eighth grade.

Sister James is worried about a student named William London who has had an impressive nose bleed during class. “Was it spontaneous?” Sister Aloysius asks, shocking Sister James with the suggestion that the boy might have caused the nosebleed himself to get out of a day of school. “You are a very innocent person,” Sister Aloysius observes disapprovingly, launching into a corrective litany of pedagogical, sociological, psychological, theological, and moral pronouncements that sets Sister James’s head spinning, and leaves us in no doubt about the principal’s view of the world.

A sampler: “There’s a chain of discipline. Make use of it.” “Every easy choice today will have its consequence tomorrow.” “Ballpoint pens make them press down, and when they press down, they write like monkeys.” “I do not approve of making heroes of lay historical figures [such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt]. If you want to talk about saints, do it in Religion.” “I question your enthusiasm about history.” “The best teachers do not perform, thy cause the students to perform.” “Innocence is a form of laziness. Innocent teachers are easily duped. You must be canny.” “The heart is warm, but your wits must be cold.” “The children should think you see right through them.” “Art. Waste of time.” “You’d trade anything for a warm look. . . . I want to see the starch in your character. . . .”

Clearly Sister Aloysius is a tough customer: an unsentimental disciplinarian who despises emotional softness, seeing in it nothing but an invitation to laxity and a source of trouble. She sees in Sister James a young colleague vulnerable to such softness, an instinctively permissive soul who must be set firmly on the straight and narrow path of personal, professional, and religious rigor. When Sister James says that she wants her students “to feel they can talk to me,” Sister Aloysius’s response is swift and stinging: “They’re children. They can talk to each other. It’s more important they have a fierce moral guardian.”

Sister Aloysius ends this moral fusillade with a sudden cease-fire, showing an entirely different side of her personality. “Sister Veronica is going blind,” she tells Sister James.

“[I]f you see her making her way down those stone stairs . . . for the love of Heaven, lightly take her hand as if in fellowship and see that she doesn’t destroy herself.” While this burst of compassion isn’t entirely altruistic—Sister Aloysius wants Sister Veronica to remain on staff because she “cannot afford to lose her”—it does show that her keen attention to the smallest detail of school life is more than just authoritarian surveillance. It is her way of fending off the potential harm posed by human weakness to every human institution and design.

In Scene III, we move back to Father Flynn’s world, this time in the school gym. Dressed in a sweatshirt and pants, with a whistle around his neck, the priest is now in his role as coach of the school’s basketball team. Instead of a sermon, he delivers a pep talk, urging the boys to relax when shooting fouls, to forget about themselves and concentrate on the goal, to find a physical routine that will dispel tension and allow them to perform unselfconsciously. He then shifts gears, and addresses the matter of personal hygiene. He criticizes their dirty fingernails, and shows them his own: “Look at my nails. They’re long, I like them a little long, but look at how clean they are. That makes it okay.”

(When a playwright takes the trouble to insert a piece of information like this, we can be sure it is neither arbitrary nor insignificant. Those fingernails are a detail called a “plant,” an element in the exposition whose importance will emerge later in the action.)

Father Flynn then winds up his pep talk with an invitation to the team to “come on over to the rectory, have some Kool-Aid and cookies, we’ll have a bull session.” We are left to imagine what Sister Aloysius would say about that scenario.

In the next scene, we are in a garden on school property with Sisters Aloysius and James. We learn that the eighth-grade boys are in the rectory with Father Flynn, being lectured on “how to be a man.” Sister Aloysius notes somewhat acerbically that no parallel talk is given to the girls, even though the founder of the Sisters of Charity was a widow and mother of five children, a train of thought that leads her to inform Sister James that she herself was married before becoming a nun, to a man who died in “the war against Adolph Hitler.” So we encounter further complications in the principal’s character: the compassionate disciplinarian is also a sexually experienced celibate.

The conversation turns to the pastor of the parish, Father Flynn’s superior, Monsignor Benedict, a man Sister Aloysius describes as “oblivious . . . otherworldly in the extreme.” (Like Father Flynn’s fingernails, this fact will prove to be crucial later in the plot.)

The conversation turns next to the topic of Donald Muller. Sister Aloysius is particularly interested in his welfare, though we don’t yet know why. He is a new student at the school; he is in the middle of his class academically; he has no friends; Sister Aloysius is

certain someone will hit him before long. But Sister James notes that Donald has a “protector. . . . Father Flynn.”

On hearing this news, Sister Aloysius “*who had been fussing with mulch, is suddenly rigid. She rises.*” Obviously upset, Sister Aloysius presses Sister James for more information about this development.

We learn that Father Flynn has shown particular interest in Donald since he joined the altar boys; that the priest has taken the boy into the rectory; that when Donald returned to class after that visit he behaved strangely, putting his head on his desk; and, most disturbingly, that the boy had alcohol on his breath.

Sister Aloysius listens to these details with a growing conviction that Father Flynn is pursuing Donald with sinister sexual intentions, perhaps that he has already violated him. And her suspicions are only strengthened by the fact that Donald is the school’s “first Negro student.” This is the reason for the nun’s particular concern for the boy in the first place. As an outsider among the Irish and Italian children in the parish, he stands in danger of being shunned, verbally abused, even physically attacked. And it is this vulnerability, in Sister Aloysius’s eyes, that attracts Father Flynn to the boy: “The little sheep lagging behind is the one the wolf goes for.”

Sister Aloysius is determined to put an end to this infamy, but she is unsure how to proceed. The hierarchical structure of the Church requires that she proceed through Monsignor Benedict, but as we have seen—and now we know why—the good cleric is far too “otherworldly” to take effective action in such a situation. “He would believe whatever Father Flynn told him,” the nun says, and that would end the process. What she will do instead is “invite Father Flynn to my office on an unrelated matter.” Sister James will be present, for the sake of propriety, and to act as a witness to any admission the priest might make. As Sister Aloysius finishes laying out her plan, she sees the boys coming out of the rectory, looking, as she says, “smug. Like they have a secret.” Reflecting on her own mistrustful nature, she tells Sister James, “If I could . . . I would certainly choose to live in innocence. But innocence can only be wisdom in a world without evil.”

With those dark words we return to the principal’s office for Scene V. Father Flynn and Sister James arrive, and Sister Aloysius begins serving tea: “*She’s . . . poised to serve him a lump of sugar . . . when she sees his nails.*” Apparently startled by the sight, she blurts out, “Your fingernails.” Father Flynn responds calmly, “I wear them a little long.”

Now we understand why his fingernails were mentioned earlier in the action. Clearly Sister Aloysius sees in them a sign of unseemly vanity, the kind of epicene affectation one might expect from a sexual pervert.

The next moment further confirms her view of the priest. When Sister Aloysius offers him sugar, he requests not a modest single lump, but a voluptuous three—clearly the mark of a sensualist.

In Sister Aloysius's eyes, the symptoms of Father Flynn's depravity continue to accumulate. The pretext on which Sister Aloysius invites the priest to her office is to discuss the Christmas pageant. Father Flynn suggests that they liven up the proceedings by including a "secular" song along with the traditional religious hymns and carols. Sister James nominates "Frosty the Snowman," and the priest enthusiastically agrees, proposing that "one of the boys dress as a snowman and dance around."

Sister Aloysius immediately smells a rat in that idea: "Which boy?," she inquires sharply. When Father Flynn proposes tryouts for the role, the nun proceeds to flatten the entire proposal: "'Frosty the Snowman' espouses a pagan belief in magic. . . . [T]he images are disturbing and the song heretical. . . . It should be banned from the airwaves."

This declaration prompts Father Flynn to jot something in his notebook, a move that does not escape Sister Aloysius's notice. She asks what he has written, "With that ballpoint pen." Another mark against him.

Eventually the discussion of the pageant gets around to Donald Muller's participation. When Father Flynn declares that he should "be treated like every other boy," Sister Aloysius reminds the priest that he has himself been providing Donald with special attention.

With this assertion, the scene takes a dark turn. In short order Sister Aloysius raises the matter of Donald's visit to the rectory and his odd behavior afterward, making no bones about her suspicion of sexual improprieties in the priest's behavior.

Outraged, Father Flynn reminds the nun that he is not answerable to her, and threatens to have her removed from duty by a leave of absence. Sister Aloysius is not to be deterred, and she lands the blow she had been holding in reserve: the smell of alcohol on Donald's breath on his return from the rectory. Taken aback, Father Flynn explains that the boy had been caught by the school custodian drinking altar wine, and he had called Donald to the rectory to warn him that such an offence was cause enough to expel him from the altar boys. But in view of Donald's problematic situation at the school, Father Flynn says he has offered him a second chance. However, now that the secret is in the open, he will in fact have to remove Donald from serving at the altar.

Sister Aloysius professes to be satisfied with the priest's explanation, though after he leaves, she makes it clear to Sister James that she feels he is lying. "I'll bring him down," she vows, and ends the scene with a phone call arranging a meeting with Donald's parents.

Scene VI returns us to Father Flynn's world. He is again in the pulpit, delivering a sermon at Sunday Mass. This time his theme is the harmful effect of gossip—a topic obviously related to his recent interview in the principal's office. He tells the story of a woman who goes to confession and admits to maligning her neighbor. Before he will give her absolution, the priest tells her she must stand on a rooftop and empty the contents of a feather pillow into the wind. She does so, and returns for absolution. "Now," says the priest, "I want you to go back and gather up every last feather that flew out on the wind!" The woman is appalled at the thought, and protests that the task is impossible—the feathers can never be retrieved. "'And that,' said Father O'Rourke, 'is *gossip!*'"

In Scene VII we are back in the garden where we find Sister James sitting "*deep in thought.*" Father Flynn enters, and they begin a conversation that turns, inevitably, toward the subject of Donald Muller.

In many ways, this is the mirror image of the meeting between Sister James and Sister Aloysius in Scene II. In that earlier encounter, Sister Aloysius admonished the younger nun to control her sentimental instincts, her potentially dangerous tendency to place the values of the heart above those of the head. In this scene, by contrast, Father Flynn eloquently urges the opposite:

There are people who go after your humanity . . . who tell you the light in your heart is a weakness. That your soft feelings betray you. . . . It's an old tactic of cruel people to kill kindness in the name of virtue. Don't believe it. There's nothing wrong with love.

In this way, he attacks his adversary and justifies his own behavior towards Donald. To Father Flynn it is only Sister Aloysius's cruelty that makes her see his charitable actions in a perversely negative light.

Sister James confesses that Sister Aloysius has indeed knocked the wind out of her sails, taking away "my joy of teaching." With this admission, she breaks into tears, and Father Flynn "*pats her uneasily, looking around.*" At this point we will recall that Sister James also cried in that earlier scene, eliciting from Sister Aloysius a single, laconic instruction: "No tears."

Consoled by Father Flynn, Sister James ends the scene by unambiguously declaring her belief in the priest's innocence, a gesture of confidence that he finds "a great relief." Meanwhile, a crow has been sitting in a nearby tree, squawking loudly. After Sister James exits, Father Flynn turns to the noisy bird and "*yells at it.*" "Oh, be quiet," he shouts, then opens his prayer book and exits.

In scene VIII Donald's mother has come to the principal's office in response to Sister Aloysius's earlier telephone call. Far from being disturbed when she learns that Father Flynn has been paying dubious attention to her son, she notes that, "maybe my son is . . . that way." And that's the reason, "His father don't like him," and beats him. So she expresses gratitude that,

One man is good to him. This priest. Puts out a hand to the boy. Does the man have his reasons? Yes. Everybody has their reasons. . . . But do I ask the man why he's good to my son? No. I don't care why. My son needs some man to care about him and see him through to where he wants to go.

So, shockingly to Sister Aloysius, this mother can accept the possibility of a sexual liaison between her son and the priest because, in the end, nobody is being hurt by it and, at some level, the relationship seems to her consensual and even mutually beneficial. Against the nun's sense of moral outrage the playwright counterposes Mrs. Muller's moral relativism, her notion that, "Sometimes things aren't black and white."

As their interview ends, Father Flynn bursts into Sister Aloysius's office in a state of "*controlled fury*." He demands an end to her "campaign" against him. She refuses, saying she has been suspicious of him from the outset because, "On the first day of the school year, I saw you touch William London's wrist. And I saw him pull away." That tiny action and reaction were enough to plant the seeds of doubt in the nun's mind. Moreover, she tells him, she has telephoned the last parish in which he served and discovered that he has been assigned to three different parishes in five years—a pattern raising even more doubts about his character.

Father Flynn continues to protest his innocence, declaring that the nun has "not the slightest proof of anything." "But," she responds, "I have my certainty, and armed with that, I will go to your last parish, and the one before that if necessary. . . . You will be exposed."

No intensity of pleading will deter Sister Aloysius from her determination to rid her school of Father Flynn. "I know you're invulnerable to true regret," she tells him. And as a final blow she snaps, "And cut your nails."

She leaves the priest alone in her office. After "*a moment*" he dials the phone, calling the bishop to ask for an appointment.

In the next and final scene we are back in the garden with Sister Aloysius and Sister James. We learn that Father Flynn's interview has resulted in the priest's transfer to another parish—St. Jerome's, where he is now pastor, a promotion. Sister James declares her belief in his innocence and asks if Sister Aloysius had any proof of his wrongdoing.

“What did you tell him to make him go,” she asks her superior. Her response shocks the young nun:

SISTER ALOYSIUS: That I had called a nun in his previous parish. That I had found out his prior history of infringements.

SISTER JAMES: So you did prove it!

SISTER ALOYSIUS: I was lying. I made no such call.

SISTER JAMES: You lied?

SISTER ALOYSIUS: In the pursuit of wrongdoing, one steps away from God. Of course there’s a price.

SISTER JAMES: I see. So now he’s in another school.

SISTER ALOYSIUS: Yes. Oh, Sister James! . . . I have doubts! I have such doubts!

With these words, the play ends.

THE SETTING. The play takes place at “St. Nicholas, a Catholic church and school in the Bronx, New York, 1964.” With those words, the playwright establishes a cultural and temporal milieu that informs every moment of the action.

First we need to ask what it means to be a “parochial” school, like St. Nicholas. Our primary sense of the word is that it refers to the Catholic auspices under which St. Nicholas operates, to its religious identity. But the word “parochial” carries other overtones and connotations, which the playwright clearly wishes to exploit. The dictionary tells us that “parochial” also means, “Narrowly restricted in scope or outlook; provincial . . .” Given this sense, one could say that the term “Catholic parochial school” is an oxymoron—a self-contradictory concept. “Catholic,” after all, means “universal; all embracing,” while “parochial” means the opposite.

But even a universal church must operate from one day to the next, carrying out its work in individual parishes defined by their local problems and limitations. St. Nicholas is “parochial” in that it is just such a little world within a vast institution. And it is “parochial” in another sense as well: it seems cut off in some way from the immense city that surrounds it.

The action of the play occurs in a set of confined spaces within the boundaries of the parish: the church, the principal’s office, the walled garden. We get very little sense of The Bronx and its million-and-a-quarter inhabitants, its rickety elevated subways, its noisy markets and factories. Instead, we feel we are in a kind of cloister—an enclosure containing a tiny group of people playing out a desperate game in seeming isolation. And yet a game whose rules and consequences are profoundly important—especially as viewed from the perspective of 2004 in the aftermath of the clerical sex scandals.

So the oxymoron comes alive dramatically. In this parochial little world, among these few people, we are watching a morality play whose themes and implications are universal.

Also important to the action of the play is the institutional culture of the Catholic Church, which is now, and was in the mid-60s, hierarchical in nature. As Sister Aloysius tells Sister James, “You are answerable to me, I to the monsignor, he to the bishop, and so on up to the Holy Father. There’s a chain of discipline. Make use of it.”

This hierarchical structure is continuously in play in *Doubt* because the drama is founded on an accusation of wrongdoing made by a nun against a priest, by a subordinate against her superior—a problematic situation given the Church’s reliance on ordered authority. It is because of this deeply-rooted deference to hierarchy that Sister Aloysius must pursue Father Flynn through deviousness and stratagem rather than through outright denunciation, since the latter would be almost certain to fail. Who would take the word of a nun against that of a priest? Of the enlisted man against the officer?

The fact that the action is set in 1964 further complicates this situation. In 1964 the Second Vatican Council was still in session. In the past lay the world preceding this revolutionary conclave; in the future hovered the Council’s far-reaching consequences. The year 1964 lay on the cusp of the two eras.

Before the Council, the Church spoke Latin at virtually every Mass in every parish in the world; its theology harked back to Aristotle via St. Thomas Aquinas; its nuns dressed in elaborate habits reminiscent of the Middle Ages; and its priests were treated with respect verging on veneration. After the Council, the language of the Mass became the local vernacular, theology morphed into a dizzying synthesis of everything from Hegel to Existentialism, nuns nearly disappeared, and your local pastor asked you to call him “Father Bob.”

The characters in *Doubt* line up on either side of the line separating these two worlds. On the pre-Council side is Sister Aloysius, with her stern devotion to duty, her flinty virtue, and her loathing of ball-point pens. On the post-Council side is Father Flynn, with his Kool-Aid, his bull-sessions, and his permissive second-chances. Sister James stands between the two, clearly pulled in the direction of Father Flynn, though under the supervision of Sister Aloysius.

And because it is 1964, and not 2004, Father Flynn is still surrounded by a wall of moral impregnability belonging to earlier era of clerical prestige. Because he is protected by this wall, Sister Aloysius’s charges seem initially absurd, even deranged—the product of her own rigidity and moral repressiveness, and not of the priest’s behavior.

The temporal setting, then, cuts two ways. On the one hand, because it is 1964, devoted priests and nuns and their lay parishioners are still expected to operate out of a sense of boundless faith in the Church and its teachings. On the other hand, also because it is 1964, these same clergy and laity are presented with an open-ended invitation to doubt, with a standing question: If so much that we embraced with such certainty in the past is being altered or discarded, why should we have faith in what replaces it? What do we trust? Whom do we trust? Why?

In his preface to the play, the author says that “There is an uneasy time when belief has begun to slip but hypocrisy has yet to take hold. . . . It is the most . . . important . . . experience of life. The beginning of change is the moment of Doubt. It is that crucial moment when I renew my humanity or become a lie.”

We also need to consider the importance of the temporal “setting” of the play’s first production: November, 2004, a time when the sexual scandals in the Church were still fresh in the public mind. Audiences would inevitably view the action of the play, set forty years earlier than the production, through the lens of the present. What would this do to their attitude toward Father Flynn? Would they leap to the conclusion that he must be guilty—thereby embracing the certainty that Shanley had set out to undermine? Or would they find that the play successfully challenges their preconceptions, leaving them doubtful about their easy assumptions regarding Catholic priests and young boys?

THE CHARACTERS. Because the play is called *Doubt* it invites us to regard its characters as a set of questions rather than a bundle of declarative sentences.

Is Father Flynn an honest young reformer eager to shake up a sclerotic Church, or an opportunist ready to exploit social upheaval for his own dark ends?

Is Sister Aloysius a repressive, dogmatic killjoy and bully, or a savvy and disciplined elder who sees the pitfalls people dig for themselves through self-indulgence and sentimental delusion?

Is Sister James a promising young idealist crushed by Sister Aloysius’s cynicism, or a dangerously naïve enabler of Father Flynn’s selfishness?

Is Mrs. Muller’s willingness to accept a sexual relationship between her son and the priest an example of a wise tolerance or of shocking expediency?

Rather than answering these questions definitively, the play provides evidence to support conflicting conclusions about each character—which is why it’s called *Doubt*.

Take **Father Flynn**. Initially, Shanley seems to be stacking the deck in his favor. He gives him the first speech in the play, and it’s a long one—a sermon in which he tells his

flock a story about a sailor lost at sea, about the anxiety that assails him, about how “Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone.”

The character here seems to be taking on the role of the “*raisonneur*,” the voice of sanity and common sense. In praising the moral value of doubt just as Shanley does in his “Preface,” Father Flynn seemingly becomes the spokesman for the playwright himself. Moreover, his sermon explores a subject dear to the hearts of any secular audience of the early twenty-first century. We all nod sagely when we hear about the burdens of “alienating sorrow,” about the anguish of our confused journey through an unwelcoming world, about the fellowship of uncertainty. In making Father Flynn one of us, Shanley is following Aristotle, who tells us that the most deeply appealing tragic hero will be someone “like ourselves.”

Not only does the priest earn our immediate sympathy, but the playwright also furnishes him in the next scene with a seemingly repellent adversary. Sister Aloysius, with her prescriptions and proscriptions, her tirades against ball-point pens and Frosty the Snowman, sounds like a member of the same demented sorority that spawned Christopher Durang’s Sister Mary Ignatius—the grade school nun whose absurd dogmatism drives her students mad. The nun as parochial inquisitor, as classroom Torquemada flogging her students into docility and compliance has become a secular cliché in the years since the 60s. Durang heightened this cliché to nightmarish proportions with his 1979 play, and Shanley himself seems to be tapping into it—though less garishly—in his portrayal of Sister Aloysius.

So Father Flynn, when he is first accused, stands before us as a sympathetic figure being assailed by an infuriated bigot.

So where’s the doubt?

It comes, at first, in little things, like the long fingernails. Why this affectation? And why call the boys’ attention to it just before inviting them to the rectory? Probably of no consequence . . . but, still. . . .

More serious is the fact that he conducts a private interview with Sister James in the garden. We have learned from Sister Aloysius in previous scenes that un-chaperoned meetings between priests and nuns violate clerical protocol. To understand why, we need only remind ourselves that the image of the convent as a hothouse of fornication was a major theme of Protestant polemic during the Reformation. Note, for instance, the scene where Hamlet, maddened by Ophelia’s betrayal, cries out, “get thee to a nunnery.” This is not a recommendation that she enter a cloister; it is a sneering directive that she become a whore, “nunnery” being a slang term for “brothel” in the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries. Does this attitude persist? Is there anyone who has not heard a prurient joke based on it?

So Sister Aloysius's punctiliousness on this matter is not mere formalism. She understands that the threat of scandal always hangs over the clergy, and she takes firm steps to avoid it. Father Flynn, by contrast, breaks the rules without compunction—when it suits his purposes, as it does in his interview with the credulous Sister James.

As that conversation proceeds, the priest's behavior begins to make us uneasy. First he tells Sister James that he has not approached the Monsignor about the allegations against him because, "Sister Aloysius would most certainly lose her position as principal You might lose your place as well." When Sister James asks if the priest is threatening her—a reasonable inference from his words—he is quick to deny it: "What do you take me for? No." But how could anyone not hear at least a warning in Father Flynn's words? There seems to be something disingenuous in his denial, a pretence of not knowing what he can't help knowing about what he said.

Father Flynn then asks the nun what she thinks Sister Aloysius's philosophy is:

SISTER JAMES: I don't have to suppose. She's told me. She discourages . . . warmth. She's suggested I be more . . . formal.

FLYNN: There are people who go after your humanity, Sister James, who tell you the light in your heart is a weakness. That your soft feelings betray you. . . . There's nothing wrong with love. . . . Have you forgotten that was the message of the Savior to us all. Love.

Though he doesn't mention Goethe as an influence on the play, it's hard to ignore the similarity between this passage and the wooing of Gretchen in *Faust*. Gretchen, smitten by her sophisticated lover, nonetheless is troubled by his neglect of formal religion. Eager to get the naïve girl into bed, Faust replies (Kaufman translation):

The All-Sustaining,
Does he not embrace and sustain
You, me, himself?
.....
Then let it fill your heart entirely,
And when your rapture in this feeling is complete,
Call it then as you will,
Call it bliss! Heart! Love! God!
I do not have a name
For this. Feeling is all. . . .

Whether Shanley was aware of the parallel with Goethe when he wrote his scene is irrelevant. The point is that the blandishments of one of drama's great seducers have become a cultural commonplace, and Father Flynn instinctively adopts Faust's pitch: God is love; love is good; trust your feelings.

When Sister James begins to weep in response to the emotional intensity of the moment, Father Flynn, "*pats her uneasily, looking around.*" To be sure, he doesn't bed Sister James, but their scene, from beginning to end, is framed as if it were a sexual assignation: There is the illicit meeting in the garden; the Faustian exhortation to surrender to feeling; the tears; and finally the physical touch.

One final moment in the scene creates further uneasiness about Father Flynn. There has been a crow cawing from time to time in the garden. When Sister James leaves, the bird squawks again, and Father Flynn "*yells*" at it: "Oh, be quiet." Two questions arise: why does Shanley put a bird in the scene, and why does the priest "yell" at the dumb thing?

Any literary crow inevitably makes us think of another noisy black bird, Edgar Allan Poe's raven. Poe's poem is an expression of grief and despair at the loss of the poet's beloved, Lenore. The raven's repeated croak, "Nevermore," underlines the hopelessness and finality of her death—and, for that matter, of every death. A close relative of the raven, the crow has also traditionally been regarded as an omen of evil or death, a sign of impending darkness. Does Shanley introduce this bad-news bird into the parish garden as the voice of Father Flynn's bad conscience? Is it foretelling some awful doom? And does the priest "yell" at the bird to silence the inner squawk of guilt? As with Father Flynn's long fingernails, everything in a carefully-wrought script exists for a purpose, even a noisy crow.

Particularly incriminating is his sudden flight from the parish following his final confrontation with Sister Aloysius. Three moments in particular stand out in that face-off.

The first is when Sister Aloysius directly asks Father Flynn, "Did you give Donald Muller wine to drink?" Father Flynn promptly answers, "No." With equal promptness, the nun follows up with another question: "Mental reservation?"

This is a somewhat arcane theological query that takes us straight to the heart of doubt. When Sister Aloysius asks about "mental reservation," she is referring to a tradition of moral reasoning which, according to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, justifies apparent untruths in the name of higher moral purpose. Thus, the encyclopedia explains, if a man is asked by a band of murderers whether their intended victim is inside his house, the man may answer "no," even though he knows that's untrue. He is permitted to do so because he decides to construe the murderers' words to mean, "Is he at home to us?"

Mentally reserving the right to understand their words in this way, the man escapes any imputation of dishonesty.

As a sharp-minded traditional nun, Sister Aloysius would be thoroughly familiar with this method of equivocation, as would Father Flynn. And so she knows that when the priest denies giving Donald the wine, his answer might well hang on how he is choosing to define to himself the meaning of “give.” Perhaps he led Donald to the cabinet where the wine is kept; perhaps he opened the door with his key; perhaps he suggested that the boy take a drink and then left the room. But if he never actually handed the boy the wine itself, he mentally reserves the right to deny that he “gave” it to him.

Father Flynn not only denies giving the boy the wine, he also denies Sister Aloysius’s query about mental reservation. But how trustworthy is *that* denial? Perhaps he mentally reserves the right to define a mental reservation as an act referring only equivocation about the literal meaning of a word, such as the man who tells the murderers that their victim is not at home. Because that’s true only in a figurative, not a literal, sense, it’s a mental reservation, a private deal about the meaning of words. Following this reasoning, if Father Flynn did not literally give Donald the wine, then he is not making a mental reservation by denying it. If he didn’t give it, then he didn’t give it, so no mental reservation necessary.

That epistemological rabbit hole reveals to for us the depths of evasion and suspicion that lie beneath the surface of the innocent world for seasoned casuists like Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn—the extent to which doubt pervades every human transaction.

A second important moment finds Father Flynn rebuking Sister Aloysius for pursuing her investigation of him in violation of strict Church procedure. “That’s not the proper route! . . . The Church is very clear. You’re supposed to go through the pastor.” Later he repeats his objection, still more emphatically: “You have no right to act on your own. . . . You have taken vows, obedience being one! You answer to us! You have no right to step outside the Church!”

As we hear these expostulations in favor of canonical law and order, we can’t help thinking of the ease with which Father Flynn broke the rules back in the garden with Sister James, or his endorsement of feeling as opposed to the formalities of ecclesiastical procedure. About which set of values is he sincere? Could the answer be neither—that he is merely appealing to whatever ideas suit his purposes? Or could he believe equally in both, being genuinely capable of Keats’s “negative capability,” that complex state of mind, “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason?” More questions without answers.

The third important moment is when Father Flynn makes what seems to be a final, desperate plea to call off the dogs of doubt. “I can’t say everything. Don’t you

understand? There are things I can't say. Even if you can't imagine the explanation, Sister, remember that there are circumstances beyond your knowledge. . . . In the spirit of charity I appeal to you."

This sounds suspicious. What can't he say? Why can't he say it? What is it that is beyond the nun's knowledge, and presumably her understanding? What is so grave that it requires an act of charity to justify its concealment?

One implication here is that he is invoking the "seal of the confessional". A priest is forbidden to reveal or discuss those things a penitent has confided during the sacrament of confession. Father Flynn himself, even in his own defense, could not reveal anything Donald Muller confessed to him. And neither Sister Aloysius nor the Monsignor, nor anyone else could force Father Flynn to reveal the secrets of a confession from Donald Muller. So, either the "facts" of this case must remain hidden because of the confidentiality of the confessional, or Father Flynn is cynically playing this card to push Sister Aloysius off his tracks.

We never learn the answer to these questions, because the next thing we hear about Father Flynn is that he has been transferred to St. Jerome's.

What conclusions do we draw? That he is guilty and fleeing from the reckoning with his crimes that Sister Aloysius threatens? That's tempting, especially in light of the actual Church sex scandals, which saw grotesquely abusive priests passed on from parish to parish multiple times in their sorry careers.

But not so fast. All we really have to lean on in judging Father Flynn are a few disturbing details of behavior, and the certainty of Sister Aloysius which magnifies them into blazing symptoms of sin. Isn't it just as likely that Father Flynn decides to leave for the reasons he plainly states: that Sister Aloysius's allegations and her constant prosecutorial scrutiny will make it impossible for him to do his work in the community? Which of us would be willing to tolerate the kind of pressure threatened by the angry nun? Under those circumstances, why not leave, and make a fresh start elsewhere?

But then again, we learned of few if any innocent priests who were brought down by crusading nuns during the scandals. If he didn't have something really dark to hide, surely he would have stood his ground, confident of the monsignor's support and the backing of the bishop.

And yet And yet. . . . And yet. . . . As the scales keep shifting back and forth we realize that this character is constructed like a pendulum on a dramatic clock. When the play begins Father Flynn seems warmly sympathetic, but as the plot develops he grows gradually more suspect, until in the end he has become a figure shuttling back and forth

between these two poles of confidence and doubt in a process of oscillation that seems endless.

Much the same is true of **Sister Aloysius**. The name she has chosen for herself as a nun is revealing. St. Aloysius Gonzaga was a brilliant, aristocratic young Jesuit of the late 16th century who died in his early twenties while ministering to the sick. “Aloysius” itself is a variant of the name “Louis,” or “Ludwig,” which originally meant “mighty warrior.” So Sister Aloysius has chosen a name that combines two contrasting qualities: the self-sacrifice of Gonzaga, and the warlike ferocity of “Ludwig.” As the play progresses, we see both these elements emerge in her actions.

At first, however, the impression she makes is unappealing. For example, she is offended by the Christmas pageant because, “Last year the girl playing Our Lady was wearing lipstick. I was waiting in the wings for that little jade.” This is the voice of the clerical gargoyle, the reactionary martinet that has become a cliché of popular culture since the 60s. But by the end of the scene she is expressing her concern for poor Sister Veronica who is losing her eyesight. With this humanizing touch, the gargoyle’s horns begin to shrink.

With her second scene, her attractiveness grows. We learn that she is a widow whose husband died fighting Hitler. We see a sense of humor when, noting Sister James’s response to this information, she says dryly, “You could at least hide your astonishment.” So she has experienced life and love outside the convent and she can make fun of herself; she is more like us than we thought.

It is when she pounces on the information that Father Flynn has become Donald Muller’s “protector” that her character completely changes shape before us. Now she is responding to something deadly serious, the kind of crime we have all heard about in horrifying detail. She passes from being the scourge of lipstick and ball-point pens to being the enemy of real evil, and her character is elevated accordingly.

What gives dramatic characters stature is their embrace of morally sympathetic principles or convictions. When characters take risks and suffer losses in pursuit of those convictions, their stature increases, and they invite our admiration and approval.

As we have seen, Sister Aloysius is threatened by Father Flynn with professional sanctions a number of times in the play. But each time, she refuses to back down or mitigate her zeal. At the end, when the conflict between the two has become most acute, her determination reaches its height. “You have no right to step outside the Church!” warns Father Flynn. To which Sister Aloysius responds,

I will step outside the Church if that's what needs to be done, though the door should shut behind me! I will do what needs to be done, Father, if it means I'm damned to Hell. You should understand that, or you will mistake me.

This seems to rise to the level of Shakespearean heroism, as when Macbeth cries out,

. . . let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer. . . .

.....

. . . better be with the dead . . .

Than on the torture of the mind to lie

In restless ecstasy (III, ii, 16-22).

Like the Scottish king, Sister Aloysius is willing to renounce her whole world, including the promise of heaven, in order to satisfy her tortured mind. Surely this is a level of determination that must earn our un-doubtful admiration?

Except . . . it's **Macbeth** she sounds like—a murderer who has been led through a river of blood by witches and demonic visions. Sister Aloysius is prepared to renounce the Church? To accept damnation? To suffer for eternity? And all to bring down Father Flynn? Is this principled heroism, or Byronic derangement? Has she, in fact, become the self-indulgent romantic she warned Sister James against in their first scene?

Once again, the playwright pulls the rug out from under one of his characters. Having followed Sister Aloysius's transformation from clerical caricature to principled agent of moral decency, we now must ask whether her "certainty" is, after all, a kind of madness.

There's one further turn to the wheel of character. As we saw above, Sister Aloysius has the final words of the play: "I have doubts! I have such doubts!" Like so much else, these words have conflicting and unresolved meanings. Most obviously, they tell us that the nun is no longer so sure about Father Flynn's guilt.

But there's another possibility. As Sister James points out somewhat mordantly when she learns that Father Flynn has been transferred, "So now he's in another school." Which is to say: all your efforts, Sister Aloysius, have succeeded only in moving the evil from here to there. Certainly, Sister Aloysius could be having doubts about the wisdom and morality of allowing that to happen as the curtain falls. Or it could be about the priest's guilt. Or it could be both.

She ends the play where Father Flynn with his Sunday sermon began it. By terminating in doubt she too becomes one of Shanley's *raisonneurs*. She and her quarry have exchanged places.

Sister James and **Mrs. Muller** are characters often referred to as “foils.” Originally, this word referred to a thin sheet of bright, polished metal—such as silver or gold—which was placed behind a precious stone to reflect and amplify its brilliance. Later it took on a figurative meaning, as when Hamlet says at the beginning of his last fencing match:

I'll be your foil, Laertes. In mine ignorance
Your skill shall . . .
Stick fiery off indeed (V, ii, 229-31).

Hamlet is saying that, when compared with his ineptitude, Laertes' mastery of fencing will shine all the more brightly.

Thus, a dramatic foil is a character that emphasizes—generally by contrast—the qualities of another, major, character. In *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, the cynical Mercutio acts as foil for the romantic, lovesick Romeo. In *Don Quixote*, the corpulent and pragmatic Sancho Panza is the foil of the idealistic and ectomorphic Don.

In *Doubt*, Sister James acts as the foil to Sister Aloysius, and perhaps also to Father Flynn. With her innocent trust in human goodness, her desire for warmth and approval, her girlish love of performance in the classroom, her ready tears, and her desire to believe Father Flynn, she provides sharp contrasts with her superior across the board.

She characterizes herself most clearly when, following her reprimand, she confesses her troubles to Sister Aloysius:

I've been trying to become more cold in my thinking as you suggested . . . I feel as if I've lost my way a little. . . . I had the most terrible dream last night. I want to be guided by you and responsible to the children, but I want my peace of mind. I must tell you I have been longing for the return of my peace of mind.

Any actor playing the role of Sister James would look carefully at this speech. Characters in a play are defined by what they want and what they are willing to do to get it. Here Sister James clearly enunciates her prime objective: to recover her peace of mind. This is the opposite of Sister Aloysius, who is driven by a Macbeth-like “torment” of mind to expose Father Flynn. This desire for “peace of mind” will lead to Sister James's “seduction” by the priest in the garden, after which she disappears from the action until the final scene, after the powder keg has exploded and the smoke is clearing.

She may also be the foil of Father Flynn—if, that is, we take him to be a cynical manipulator, using people as necessary for his purposes. In that case, her trusting nature would contrast sharply with his Machiavellianism, her innocence of mind with his “mental reservations.”

Mrs. Muller is another foil to Sister Aloysius, creating a contrast from a different direction. Whereas Sister James seeks peace of mind through innocence, Mrs. Muller is a pragmatist who looks facts in the face and deals frankly with them. She accepts the fact that her son is gay; she understands that even priests have human appetites that must be satisfied; she sees that things are not black and white. Mrs. Muller wants above all to get her boy out the door of St. Nicholas and into high school, and is prepared to make any reasonable moral compromise to achieve that goal. “I don’t know that you and me are on the same side,” she tells Sister Aloysius. “I’ll be standing with my son and those who are good with my son.”

This is her motivational counterpart to Sister James’s peace of mind: her son’s welfare. Unlike Sister Aloysius, she has no room in her world for moral absolutes if they conflict with that core objective. If Father Flynn’s continued presence at St. Nicholas helps Donald to survive until June and to move on to high school, then the nature of the priest’s interest in the boy doesn’t concern her.

Sister Aloysius is incapable of Sister James’s innocence, or of Mrs. Muller’s pragmatic relativism, but each foil makes the central character’s nature clearer to us.

THEMES. “Doubt” is a short word with a long definition. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* devotes about 3500 words to the subject, and that doesn’t even include its discussion of “skepticism.” *The American Heritage Dictionary*, as befits its compact format, is more succinct, though it still manages to capture some of the complexity and range of the concept.

As a transitive verb, according to the dictionary, “to doubt” is:

1. To be undecided or skeptical about: *began to doubt some accepted doctrines.*
2. To tend to disbelieve; distrust: *doubts politicians when they make sweeping statements.*
3. To regard as unlikely: *I doubt that we’ll arrive on time.*
4. Archaic. To suspect; fear.

As an intransitive verb, “to doubt” is, “To be undecided or skeptical.”

And as a noun, “doubt” means:

1. A lack of certainty that often leads to irresolution.
2. A lack of trust.
3. A point about which one is uncertain or skeptical: *reassured me by answering my doubts.*
4. The condition of being unsettled or unresolved: *an outcome still in doubt.*

The editors of the dictionary then sketch out the word's etymology. Ultimately, it comes to us from an Indo-European root, "dwo," the ancient ancestor of a bundle of later words whose core meaning is "two-ness."

Doubt, then, is about two-ness of mind, and is itself is of two kinds: doubt as to facts, and doubt as to ideas or beliefs.

The former kind is, in principle at least, capable of resolution. Suppose someone doubts that Bob can lift 100 pounds. If Bob then steps forward picks up the weight, the doubt is dispelled.

But what if someone doubts that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and has spoken through the Prophets (an idea affirmed by millions of Americans every Sunday)? No doubt, one could support this proposition with evidence drawn from Scripture and from the writings of the Fathers and the Doctors of the Church. But that evidence might itself be controversial, subject to conflicting interpretations, or dismissed as inauthentic or irrelevant. In such a situation, one either believes or denies primarily on the basis of faith.

Which kind of doubt does *Doubt* explore?

Initially the play seems to be concerned with doubt as to matters of fact. Did Father Flynn give Donald the wine or didn't he? Did he make sexual overtures to the boy or didn't he? Has he in fact had sexual contact with Donald, or hasn't he?

Sister Aloysius is convinced that the answer to all these questions is "yes." She operates, she says at one point, on an unassailable base of "certainty."

But does she? After all, it is her skepticism about human nature and its devious ways that leads her to suspect Father Flynn in the first place. It is her distrust of the monsignor, who is too "otherworldly" to do his job competently, that leads her to stalk the priest on her own. And it is her cynical hunch that Father Flynn and his previous pastor have "an understanding" about hushing up the priest's behavior that causes her circumvent—or to claim to circumvent—Church protocol.

So Sister Aloysius, so certain of her convictions about Father Flynn, arrives at those convictions, and acts on them as she does, entirely as a result of her doubts about human nature and the integrity of the clergy—doubts about fundamental values rather than empirical facts. Paradoxically, the character who exhibits the greatest certainty in the play is also its greatest doubter

Sister James doesn't exhibit much doubt in the course of the action. In fact, she flees doubt—the condition of double-mindedness—in search of its opposite: peace of mind.

Father Flynn gives a sermon on doubt, recognizing it as a universal human experience, a bond that helps us understand and reach out to one another. Presumably, then, he has himself experienced doubt. But of what? That we never learn in detail. True, he does seem skeptical about Sister Aloysius's pre-Vatican II approach to religious education. But that's not really doubt—not in the context of 1964. Rather, his views are those of the rising faction in the Church, and probably help explain his elevation to pastor at St. Jerome's.

So Father Flynn's role in the play is not that of doubter, but of the one doubted, viewed with two minds. But by whom? Not Sister James, who winds up believing him completely. Not Sister Aloysius, who—with the exception of those equivocal final words—disbelieves him completely. Instead it is we, the audience, who are Father Flynn's double-minded doubters.

On the one hand, we grow suspicious of him in the course of the action because, thanks to the Church sex scandals, we have come to know his type: the charismatic young priest who works with boys for all the wrong reasons. Sure, we say to ourselves, Sister Aloysius has a point. But the charismatic young priest is never shown to have done anything wrong. Donald doesn't accuse him; Mr. McGinn, the custodian who caught Donald drinking the wine, doesn't accuse him; his colleagues from past assignments don't accuse him. So unless we are going to give ourselves over completely to Sister Aloysius's ferocious determination, we can't really accuse him either.

So what's the moral of the story? Does the play want us to embrace our doubt, that “lack of certainty that often leads to irresolution?” But irresolution is what prevailed during the scandals, so that can't be the answer.

Should we instead stick with Sister Aloysius and her certainty? But, as we have seen, that certainty seems to implode at the end.

So . . . what to conclude? Clearly, if the world is to continue, people must move beyond doubt to make choices and decisions. Those are the stuff of everyday life, and the primary materials of drama. But this play reminds us that in the confusing rush of life our certainties are always subject to exposure as assertions of will rather than statements of fact. To act while also doubting is the condition we're stuck with. Take away either, and we maim ourselves.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you feel the same way about Father Flynn at the end of the play as you do at the beginning? If not, why not?

2. Do you feel the same way about Sister Aloysius at the end as at the beginning? If not why not?
3. Why does Sister Aloysius object to ball-point pens? What do you think she would prefer instead? Why?
4. Do you think Sister Aloysius's advice to Sister James about how she should teach and how she should relate to students is good or bad? Why?
5. Do you think Father Flynn incriminates himself at any point? If so, when and how?
6. Do you think Sister Aloysius discredits herself at any point? If so, when and how?
7. Do you think that Mrs. Muller's attitude toward Father Flynn and her son is appropriate?
8. Does Donald's race matter to the other characters in the play? If so, how and why?
9. Why doesn't Sister Aloysius believe Father Flynn?
10. What are some facts or ideas you doubt? Do you feel these doubts are helpful or harmful?