

ON STAGE
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DOUBT

a PARABLE

BY JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY



Study Guide

3M STUDENT
SERIES

DOUBT

a PARABLE

BY JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY

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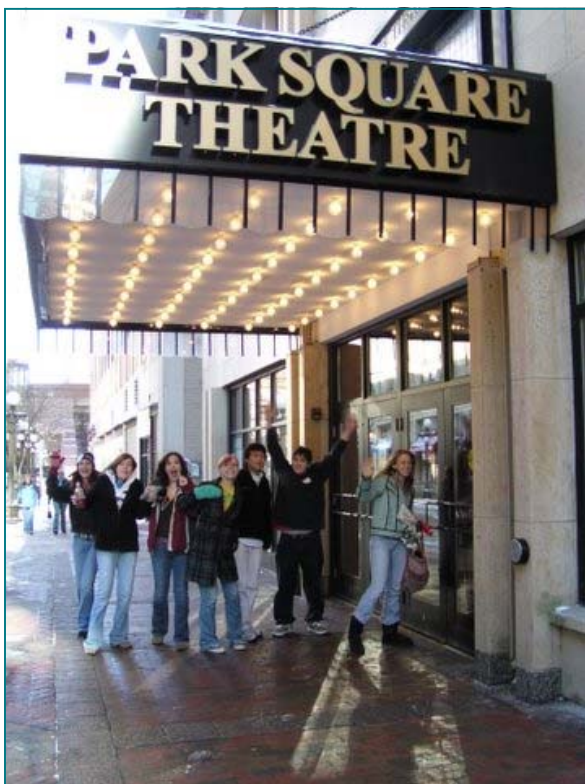
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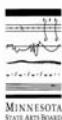
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Plot Summary

Set at St. Nicholas Catholic School, located in the Bronx area of New York City in 1964, *Doubt: A Parable* opens with the parish priest, Father Flynn, giving a sermon on the universal experience of doubt.

The next scene begins with the school's principal, Sister Aloysius, questioning the trusting relationship and moderate discipline practices that a young nun, Sister James, has with her students. Sister Aloysius advises Sister James to be more strict. As Sister James is dismissed, Sister Aloysius leaves her with a cryptic message—be on the lookout for anything suspicious going on around the school.

The play then shifts back to Father Flynn who is coaching the boys in basketball. As he explains how to successfully make a basket from the foul line, he shifts his focus to lecturing the boys on general hygiene. The scene ends with Father Flynn inviting the boys to the rectory for snacks and further discussion.

In scene 4, Sister Aloysius and Sister James meet again. This time, they discuss the progress of the school's only black student, Donald Muller. Sister James has observed Father Flynn's special interest in the boy. She also informs Sister Aloysius of a recent incident involving Donald coming to class looking uncomfortable and smelling of alcohol upon leaving Father Flynn's company. Sister Aloysius immediately suspects an inappropriate relationship between Donald and the priest.

Sister Aloysius requests Sister James' presence when confronting Father Flynn about the incident involving Donald. Father Flynn admits he caught the boy drinking altar wine, but he didn't disclose the information to prevent Donald from losing his position as an altar boy. While Sister James believes the priest's story, Sister Aloysius remains suspicious.

Doubting the truth of Father Flynn's statements, Sister Aloysius meets with Donald Muller's mother to discuss the situation. Mrs. Muller informs the nun that since the allegations are speculative, she is thankful the priest has made her son feel comfortable at the school. As soon as Donald's mother leaves, Father Flynn enters the nun's office and confronts Sister Aloysius regarding her campaign to destroy his reputation. Sister Aloysius maintains she believes in his guilt just as firmly as Father Flynn insists upon his innocence in the situation, and the nun threatens to seek out proof. When she exits, Father Flynn places a call to the bishop.

In the pivotal final scene, the audience learns through a conversation between Sister Aloysius and Sister James that Father Flynn has left the parish after requesting a transfer. Sister Aloysius admits to the younger nun that she never had any proof of Father Flynn's guilt. The play ends with Sister Aloysius revealing uncertainty about her quest for the truth.



Photo by P. Yisma

Sister Aloysius played by Linda Kelsey*

By Mari O'Meara
EDEN PRAIRIE HIGH SCHOOL

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Born to Write: Biography of Playwright John Patrick Shanley

Pulitzer Prize winning playwright John Patrick Shanley had never even seen a play until he worked on a production of *Cyrano de Bergerac* in high school. His Bronx childhood did not offer him exposure to the New York theatres that produce his plays today. He credits it, however, with giving him life experiences and the grit needed to pursue his passion for writing.

Born in Brooklyn in 1950 to Irish-immigrant parents, he was the youngest of five children. Shanley grew up in an anti-intellectual, racist, violent neighborhood in which he always felt the outsider. “I was in constant fistfights from the time I was six. I did not particularly want to be” (*New York Times Online*). His relationship with his mother was turbulent and provided fodder for several of his troubled male characters.

He was closer to his father, a meat-packer, who never quite understood his son’s passion for writing, and who, for most of his life, encouraged Shanley to “get a real job.” Until Shanley won an Oscar for the screenplay of *Moonstruck* in 1987, he had plenty of “real jobs,” including elevator operator, house painter, furniture mover, locksmith, bartender, and sandwich maker. The Oscar helped catapult him into a full-time writing career.

Shanley wanted to be a writer for as long as he can remember. A self-declared “born writer,” he won an essay contest at age 12. However, it was in a playwriting course at New York University where he found his voice for writing plays and “has been doing it ever since” (*British Theatre Guide Online*).

A prolific writer with over 30 plays and 12 screenplays to his credit, his 2005 hit *Doubt, A Parable* won him the Pulitzer Prize for Drama as well as the Tony Award for Best Play. *Doubt* continues to be performed worldwide and has been translated into several languages. He personally directed a film version of the play starring Meryl Streep and Phillip Seymour Hoffman.

Doubt, A Parable is the first play of a projected trilogy “exploring specifics of my life story as it overlaps with major changes in the social fabric of this country” (*Playbill Online*). (The second play is *Defiance*, and the name of the third play has yet to be announced.) The drama takes place in a Roman Catholic school in the Bronx in the 1960s, much like the one Shanley attended. Actually, he was asked to leave St. Anthony’s Grammar School where corporal punishment was the rule rather than the exception and ended up at Thomas More Preparatory School in Harrisville, New Hampshire, where he encountered some humane teachers whose kindness inspired him to write *Doubt*.



John Patrick Shanley

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Born to Write: Biography of Playwright John Patrick Shanley

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It was at Thomas More that he learned there are two sides to every suspicion. In an interview with Alex Witchel for the *New York Times Magazine* (11/7/2004) entitled “The Confessions of John Patrick Shanley,” he stated, “It was homosexual teachers for the most part who saved me. The head of discipline at Thomas More was gay, and he was my friend and protector. Did he have his reasons for being interested in me? Everybody has their reasons. Passion fuels many things and it’s used in many ways. Many of these people never cross the line.” However, providing a contrasting view, a child in Shanley’s extended family was molested by a priest. His parents reported it to several officials up through the Church’s chain of command and received word that a senior member of the Catholic hierarchy would “take care of it.” The offending priest was subsequently promoted instead, and the shocked family left the Church.

Another reason Shanley wrote the play was because, “There is no room or value placed on doubt [in today’s culture], which is one of the hallmarks of the wise man. It’s getting harder and harder in this society to find a place for spacious, true intellectual exchange. It’s all becoming about who won the argument, which is just moronic.” And so the six year old playground scrapper has become the advocate of enlightened verbal sparring, a promoter of healthy dialogue which encourages the participants to examine, to interrogate, to doubt. His plays often end in ambiguity, his intention being not to provide solutions, but a vehicle for more discussion. He says, “The last act of the play takes place when people leave the theatre and begin to talk about it” (*British Theatre Guide Online*).

Shanley suffers from severe glaucoma, and he knows from experience that people “see” things differently, from various points of view, and his physical challenges have become a metaphor for his writing. However, his disability has not slowed him down or diffused his passion for acting as a devil’s advocate in regards to entrenched social paradigms that have stood in the way of change. Above the computer in his Brooklyn Heights apartment there hangs a hand-made sign reading “Make Me.” Obviously no one will be able to “make” Shanley stop writing or pushing the envelope in his exploration of human and societal relationships.

His self-written biography for *Playbill* provides insight into his personality:

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY (Playwright). John Patrick Shanley is from the Bronx. 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 in the United States Marine Corps. He did fine. He's still doing okay. Mr. Shanley is interested in your reactions. Please send your impressions to shanleymoney@aol.com.

This invitation mirrors his desire to inspire thoughtful conversation. Word is that he writes back!

CONTINUED...

Born to Write: Biography of Playwright John Patrick Shanley

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By Pam Larson
INDEPENDENT THEATRE ARTIST/EDUCATOR
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Getting to Know the Characters

Father Brendan Flynn

A priest, in his thirties, at St. Nicolas parish and school. Father Flynn teaches religion and physical education. He is passionate about having the school become more involved with the whole community.

Sister Aloysius Beauvier

A Catholic nun in the order of the Sisters of Charity, she is the principal at St. Nicholas. In her fifties/sixties, she believes in strict order and discipline.

Sister James

A young nun, in her twenties, who is also in the order of the Sisters of Charity. She is a newer teacher at St. Nicolas School and wishes to please the principal while staying true to her own idealistic beliefs.

Mrs. Muller

The mother of Donald Muller who is the school's first and only black student. She is of the working class and is thankful for the education Donald is receiving at St. Nicolas.

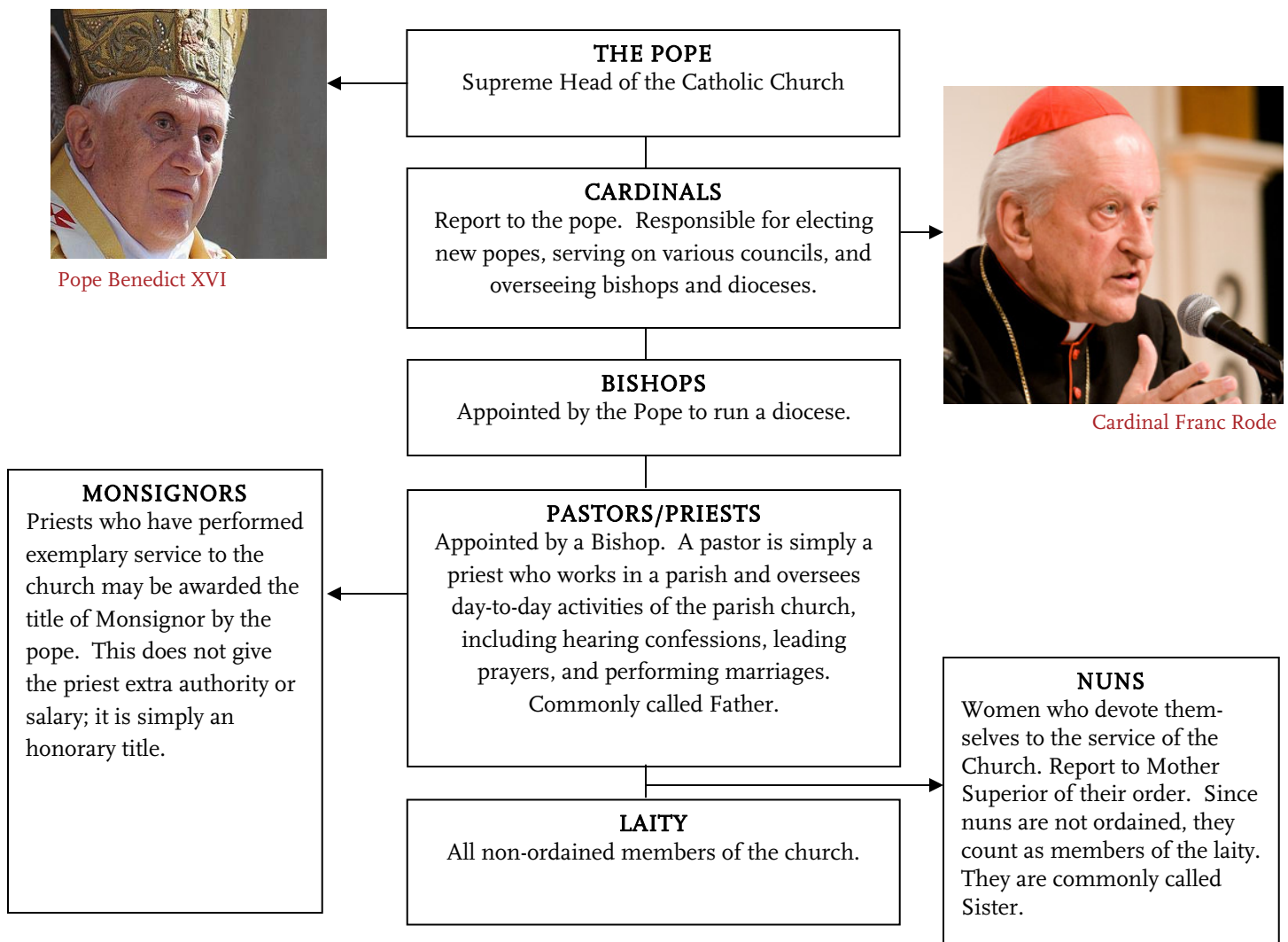
By Mari O'Meara
EDEN PRAIRIE HIGH SCHOOL

Hierarchy of the Catholic Church

Church hierarchy can be confusing if you are unfamiliar with the terms. Think of the rankings within the Church as you would think of the rankings within a government: The **Pope** is the top authority, like a president, to whom members of the Church answer. He chooses **Cardinals** to assist him in specific areas, like the President appoints a Secretary of Education and a Secretary of Defense.

Just as our country is divided into states which are run by governors, the Church is divided into **dioceses** which are overseen by **bishops**. Dioceses come in many different sizes; a single diocese may consist of several counties or an entire state. An especially large diocese is called an **archdiocese** and is run by an **archbishop**.

Each diocese is then divided into **parishes**, which cover several neighborhoods. Each parish has a **parish church** and a **pastor**, who is appointed by the bishop. Here's a visual example.



Adapted From Milwaukee Repertory Study Guide

Vatican I and Vatican II

Doubt, *A Parable* is set in 1964, in the middle of a period of great change in the Catholic Church. In 1962, Pope John XXIII created something called the “Second Ecumenical Council,” also known as Vatican II, in order to bring the Church up to date. He felt that religion had become a “fortress” and the Church was failing to address the needs of society. As he put it, “I want to throw open the windows of the Church so that we can see out and the people can see in.” Gathering all the world’s bishops in Rome, as well as many religious experts and consultants, Pope John began a series of meetings to reform the Church for the modern age.

Vatican II was a huge undertaking. Over 2,500 religious leaders spent four years discussing and writing reforms for the 2,000-year-old institution. The idea of the Council was not to revise the documents that the Church was based on, but to figure out how to present those documents in a new way. The changes made during Vatican II are too many to even summarize, but here is a general overview of the face of the Church before and after the Council.

BEFORE VATICAN II...	AFTER VATICAN II...
Mass was conducted exclusively in Latin.	Mass is read in local language, and everyone in the church may participate in the prayer.
Emphasis on the separation between the Church and the secular world: the idea is that the Church is a pure, perfect institution and the secular world does not live up to its standards.	Emphasis on community. Church services are intended to be less formal and intimidating, and a greater emphasis is placed on neighborhood outreach: picnics, softball leagues, and so on.
Women had a very limited role within the Church. They could be nuns, but they could not be ordained. Priests and bishops made all decisions regarding the parish.	Parish councils are formed to give lay people of both genders input on the running of the church: spending, outreach, education, and so on. Women still cannot be ordained, however.
Lay people were expected to “pray, pay, and obey” - and were not allowed to do much else.	Laypeople make up parish councils (see above) and are allowed to aid in church ceremonies that were previously performed only by the clergy.
Religious services were seen as a time for quiet reflection. They were not social occasions. Anything that was “less than serious” worked against the idea of the Church.	Religious services are given a more social atmosphere. A pastor might bring in a guitar or tell jokes during his sermons.
Little attempt was made to reach out to other religious groups. The Catholic Church was seen as the only true Church.	Dialogue committees are formed to find common ground with other Christian churches and figure out ways to work together. Catholic groups begin to work alongside Jewish groups to combat anti-Semitism.

Adapted From Milwaukee Repertory Study Guide

Tossing Lines

A PRE-PLAY CLASS ACTIVITY

Objective

To familiarize students with the play by working with lines spoken in the play. Based on these lines, students will make and discuss their predictions about the play's conflicts and characters. This activity helps students form questions, gain insight, and build excitement for seeing and hearing these lines acted out on stage. This activity serves the students best if completed before they attend the play.

Time Allotted

20-30 minutes

Materials

Tennis ball or hacky sack

17 slips of paper, cut from Tossing Lines Resource on the next page

Procedure

Cut and distribute the slips of paper printed on the following page to 17 volunteers. Give students a few minutes (or overnight, if appropriate) to memorize (or prepare a dramatic reading of their line with no memorization). Have these 17 students form a circle and give one student the ball. After he/she speaks the line, the student tosses the ball to another student who speaks his/her assigned line. Students toss the ball throughout the circle until all lines have been heard a few times. Encourage students to speak lines with varying emotions, seeking out the best way to perform the lines.

Optional

Re-assign lines within the group (or to other students in the classroom) and continue for another round.

Freewriting/Discussion

After lines have been tossed, allow students five minutes to freewrite their ideas and questions about the content of the play. The following questions may be used to guide freewrite and/or discussion.

1. What conflicts can you predict in the play?
2. Do you think innocence is a form of laziness are? Why or why not?
3. What do you think it means when the character says, "You're not going against no *man* in a robe and win, Sister."
4. What are boys really made of?
5. Are there times when guilt is created by only conversation and speculation?
6. Are there times in your life when you've had doubts or felt lost? What has helped you?

Adapted from Peggy O'Brien's
Shakespeare Set Free (1993)

Tossing Lines From *Doubt: A Parable*

A PRE-PLAY CLASS ACTIVITY: QUOTES FROM THE PLAY

To the Teacher:

Cut these apart and distribute to students.



"God knows their pain."

"Boys are made of gravel, soot and tar paper."

"Innocence is a form of laziness."

"The children should think you see right through them."

"I must be careful not to create something by saying it."

"Have some Kool-Aid and cookies, we'll have a bull session."

"When you take a step to address wrongdoing, you are taking a step away from God."

"It is my job to outshine the fox in cleverness!"

"But innocence can only be wisdom in a world without evil."

"It's an old tactic of cruel people to kill kindness in the name of virtue."

"There are just times in life when we feel lost."

"Look, Sister, I don't want any trouble, and I feel like you're on the march somehow."

"You're not going against no *man* in a *robe* and win, Sister."

"You may think you're doing good, but the world's a hard place."

"Everything seems uncertain to me."

"I feel as if I've lost my way a little."

"I've noticed several of you guys have dirty nails."

Scene to Read Aloud #1

A PRE-PLAY CLASS ACTIVITY

In this scene, we are shown a conversation between Sister Aloysius and Sister James about the students in Sister James' 8th grade class. This conversation illuminates the philosophies of education and personalities of the two nuns.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. William London had a ballpoint pen. He was fiddling with it while he waited for his mother. He's not using it for assignments, I hope.

SISTER JAMES. No, of course not.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. I'm sorry I allowed even cartridge pens into the school. The students really should only be learning script with true fountain pens. Always the easy way out these days. What does that teach? Every easy choice today will have its consequence tomorrow. Mark my words.

SISTER JAMES. Yes, Sister.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Ballpoints make them press down, and when they press down, they write like monkeys.

SISTER JAMES. I don't allow them ballpoint pens.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Good. Penmanship is dying all across the country. You have some time. Sit down.
(Sister James hesitates and sits down.) We might as well have a talk. I've been meaning to talk to you. I observed your lesson on the New Deal at the beginning of the term. Not bad. But I caution you. Do not idealize Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He was a good president, but he did attempt to pack the Supreme Court. I do not approve of making heroes of lay historical figures. If you want to talk about saints, do it in Religion.

SISTER JAMES. Yes, Sister.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Also. I question your enthusiasm for History.

SISTER JAMES. But I love History!

SISTER ALOYSIUS. That is exactly my meaning. You favor History and risk swaying the children to value it over their other subjects. I think this is a mistake.

SISTER JAMES. I never thought of that. I'll try to treat my other lessons with more enthusiasm.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. No. Give them their History without putting sugar all over it. That's the point. Now. Tell me about your class. How would you characterize the condition of 8-B?

SISTER JAMES. I don't know where to begin. What do you want to know?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Let's begin with Stephen Inzio.

SISTER JAMES. Stephen Inzio has the highest marks in the class.

CONTINUED...

Scene to Read Aloud #1

CONTINUED

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Noreen Horan?

SISTER JAMES. Second highest marks.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Brenda McNulty?

SISTER JAMES. Third highest.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. You see I am making a point, Sister James. I know that Stephen Inzio, Noreen Horan and Brenda McNulty are one, two and three in your class. School-wide, there are forty-eight such students each grade period. I make it my business to know all forty-eight of their names. I do not say this to aggrandize myself, but to illustrate the importance of paying attention. You must pay attention as well.

SISTER JAMES. Yes, Sister Aloysius.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. I cannot be everywhere.

SISTER JAMES. Am I falling short, Sister?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. These three students with the highest marks. Are they the most intelligent children in your class?

SISTER JAMES. No, I wouldn't say they are. But they work the hardest.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Very good! That's right! That's the ethic. What good's a gift if it's left in the box? What good is a high IQ if you're staring out the window with your mouth agape? Be hard on the bright ones, Sister James. Don't be charmed by cleverness. Not theirs. And not yours. I think you are a competent teacher, Sister James, but maybe not our best teacher. The best teachers do not perform, they cause the students to perform.

SISTER JAMES. Do I perform?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. As if on a Broadway stage.

SISTER JAMES. Oh dear. I had no conception!

SISTER ALOYSIUS. You're showing off. You like to see yourself ten feet tall in their eyes. Another thing occurs to me. Where were you before?

SISTER JAMES. Mount St. Margaret's.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. All girls.

SISTER JAMES. Yes.

CONTINUED...

Scene to Read Aloud #1

CONTINUED

SISTER ALOYSIUS. I feel I must remind you. Boys are made of gravel, soot, and tar paper. Boys are a different breed.

SISTER JAMES. I feel I know how to handle them.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. But perhaps you are wrong. And perhaps you are not working hard enough.

SISTER JAMES. Oh. *(Sister James cries a little.)*

SISTER ALOYSIUS. No tears.

SISTER JAMES. I thought you were satisfied with me.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Satisfaction is a vice. Do you have a handkerchief?

SISTER JAMES. Yes.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Use it. Do you think that Socrates was satisfied? Good teachers are never content. We have some three hundred and seventy-two students in this school. It is a society which requires constant educational, spiritual and human vigilance. I cannot afford an excessively innocent instructor in my eighth grade class. It's self-indulgent. Innocence is a form of laziness. Innocent teachers are easily duped. You must be canny, Sister James.

Questions for Scene to Read Aloud #1

1. What do we learn about Sister Aloysius from her view on ballpoint pens? Find the sentence in that section that indicates her philosophy of education and life.
2. What other advice does Sister Aloysius give to Sister James to help her become a more effective teacher?
3. What does Sister Aloysius say that helps us understand her views toward the students in her school and how they should be treated?
4. In her last speech, Sister Aloysius tells Sister James what she feels the role of the teacher should be. What does she identify as the qualities a good teacher must have?
5. How do the reactions of Sister James to the criticisms of her superior illuminate the younger nun's philosophy of teaching?

By Marcia Aubineau
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

Scene to Read Aloud #2

A PRE-PLAY CLASS ACTIVITY

In this scene, Sister James and Father Flynn are in the office of Sister Aloysius where the three of them are discussing the upcoming Christmas pageant.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. ...Would you have a cup of tea, Father?

FLYNN. I would love a cup of tea.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Perhaps you could serve him, Sister?

SISTER JAMES. Of course.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. And yourself, of course.

SISTER JAMES. Would you like tea, Sister Aloysius?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. I've already had my cup.

FLYNN. Is there sugar?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Sugar? Yes! (*Rummages in her desk.*) It's here somewhere. I put it in the drawer for Lent last year and never remembered to take it out.

FLYNN. It mustn't have been much to give up then.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. No, I'm sure you're right. Here it is. I'll serve you, though for want of practice, I'm... [clumsy] (*She's got the sugar bowl and is poised to serve him a lump of sugar with a small pair of tongs when she sees his nails.*) Your fingernails.

FLYNN. I wear them a little long. The sugar?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Oh yes. One?

FLYNN. Three.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Three. (*She's appalled but tries to hide it.*)

FLYNN. Sweet tooth.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. One, two, three. Sister, do you take sugar? (*Sister Aloysius looks at Sister James.*)

SISTER JAMES. (*To Sister Aloysius.*) Never! (*To Father Flynn.*) Not that there's anything wrong with sugar. (*To Sister Aloysius again.*) Thank you. (*Sister Aloysius puts the sugar away in her desk.*)

CONTINUED...

Scene to Read Aloud #2

CONTINUED

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Well, thank you, Father, for making the time for us. We're at our wit's end.

FLYNN. I think it's an excellent idea to rethink the Christmas pageant. Last year's effort was a little woebegone.

SISTER JAMES. No! I loved it! (*Becomes self-conscious.*) But I love all Christmas pageants. I just love the Nativity. The birth of the Savior. And the hymns of course. "O Little Town of Bethlehem," "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"...

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Thank you, Sister James. Sister James will be co-directing the pageant with Mrs. Shields this year. So what do you think, Father Flynn? Is there something new we could do?

FLYNN. Well, we all love the Christmas hymns, but it might be jolly to include a secular song.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Secular.

FLYNN. Yes. "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas." Something like that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. What would be the point of performing a secular song?

FLYNN. Fun.

SISTER JAMES. Or "Frosty the Snowman."

FLYNN. That's a good one. We could have one of the boys dress as a snowman and dance around.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Which boy?

FLYNN. We'd do tryouts.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. "Frosty the Snowman" espouses a pagan belief in magic. The snowman comes to life when an enchanted hat is put on his head. If the music were more somber, people would realize the images are disturbing and the song heretical. (*Sister James and Father Flynn exchange a look.*)

SISTER JAMES. I've never thought about "Frosty the Snowman" like that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. It should be banned from the airwaves.

FLYNN. So. Not "Frosty the Snowman." (*Father Flynn writes something in a small notebook.*)

SISTER ALOYSIUS. I don't think so. "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" would be fine, I suppose. The parents would like it. May I ask what you wrote down? With that ballpoint pen.

CONTINUED...

Scene to Read Aloud #2

CONTINUED

FLYNN. Oh, Nothing. An idea for a sermon.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. You had one just now?

FLYNN. I get them all the time.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. How fortunate.

FLYNN. I forget them, so I write them down.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. What is the idea?

FLYNN. Intolerance. (*Sister James tries to break a bit of tension.*)

SISTER JAMES. Would you like a little more tea, Father?

FLYNN. Not yet. I think a message of the Second Ecumenical Council was that the Church needs to take on a more familiar face. Reflect the local community. We should sing a song from the radio now and then. Take the kids out for ice cream.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Ice cream.

FLYNN. Maybe take the boys on a camping trip. We should be friendlier. The children and the parents should see us as members of their family rather than emissaries from Rome. I think the pageant should be charming, like a community theatre doing a show.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. But we are not members of their family. We're different.

FLYNN. Why? Because of our vows?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Precisely.

FLYNN. I don't think we're so different. (*To Sister James.*) You know, I would take some more tea, Sister. Thank you.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. And they think we're different. The working-class people of this parish trust us to be different.

FLYNN. I think we're getting off the subject.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Yes, you're right, back to it. The Christmas pageant.

Questions for Scene to Read Aloud #2

1. What clues are we given to indicate Sister Aloysius' attitude toward Father Flynn? What does she object to? What might be the reasons for her objections?
2. What do we learn about Sister Aloysius' views on religion from her reactions to the suggestions Sister James and Father Flynn propose for the pageant?
3. What do we learn about Sister James' views on Christmas pageants? What do her views indicate about her personality?
4. What does the discussion surrounding "Frosty the Snowman" show us about the views and personalities of each of the three characters?
5. What suggestions does Father Flynn make about how he feels the Church should change? What role does he feel the post-Vatican II Church (see study guide article on this topic) should play in the community? What are Sister Aloysius' reactions to his comments? What do her reactions illuminate about her character?
6. Based on the discussion, what is Father Flynn's new idea for a sermon?

By **Marcia Aubineau**
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

Scene to Read Aloud #3

A PRE-PLAY CLASS ACTIVITY

In this scene, Sister Aloysius is having a conversation with Mrs. Muller, the mother of the boy who was seen drinking the altar wine, about the probability of Father Flynn trying to bring about an “improper relationship” with her son Donald.

MRS. MULLER. Let me ask you something. You honestly think that priest gave Donald that wine to drink?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Yes, I do.

MRS. MULLER. Then how come my son got kicked off the altar boys if it was the man that gave it to him?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. The boy got caught, the man didn't....I believe this man is creating or has already brought about an improper relationship with your son.

MRS. MULLER. I don't know.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. I know I'm right.

MRS. MULLER. Why you need to know something like that for sure when you don't? Please, Sister. You got some kind a righteous cause going with this priest, and now you want to drag my boy into it. My son doesn't need additional difficulties. Let him take the good and leave the rest when he leaves this place in June. He knows how to do that. I taught him how to do that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. What kind of mother are you?

MRS. MULLER. Excuse me, but you don't know enough about life to say a thing like that, Sister.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. I know enough.

MRS. MULLER. You know the rules maybe, but that don't cover it.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. I know what I won't accept!

MRS. MULLER. You accept what you gotta accept, and you work with it. That's the truth I know. Sorry to be so sharp, but you're in here in this room ...

SISTER ALOYSIUS. This man is in my school.

MRS. MULLER. Well, he's gotta be somewhere, and maybe he's doing some good too. You ever think of that?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. He's after the boys.

CONTINUED...

Scene to Read Aloud #3

CONTINUED

MRS. MULLER. Well, maybe some of them boys won't get caught. Maybe what you don't know maybe is my son is ... that way. That's why his father beat him up. Not the wine. He beat Donald for being what he is.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. What are you telling me?

MRS. MULLER. I'm his mother. I'm talking about his nature now, not anything he's done. But you can't hold a child responsible for what God gave him to be.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Listen to me with care, Mrs. Muller. I'm only interested in actions. It's hopeless to discuss a child's possible inclination. I'm finding it difficult enough to address a man's deeds. This isn't about what the boy may be, but what the man is. It's about the man.

MRS. MULLER. But there's the boy's nature.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Let's leave that out of it.

MRS. MULLER. Forget it then. You're the one forcing people to say these things out loud. Things are in the air and you leave them alone if you can. That's what I know. My boy came to this school 'cause they were gonna kill him at the public school. So we were lucky enough to get him in here for his last year. Good. His father don't like him. He comes here, the kids don't like him. 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. You have your 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. And thank God, this educated man with some kindness in him wants to do just that.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. This will not do.

MRS. MULLER. It's just till June. Sometimes things aren't black and white.

SISTER ALOYSIUS. And sometimes they are. I'll throw your son out of this school. Make no mistake.

MRS. MULLER. But why would you do that? If nothing started with him?

SISTER ALOYSIUS. Because I will stop this whatever way I must.

Questions for Scene to Read Aloud #3

1. Explain Sister Aloysius' position on the matter of Father Flynn's relationship with Donald Muller. Is her opinion based on fact or assumptions? Why is she so sure she's right? What is her real concern about the wine incident?
2. How does Mrs. Muller counter Sister Aloysius' suspicions? What do we learn about Donald's relationship with his father? How does she describe her son's "nature"? What was Donald's previous experience at public school? What is her opinion of Father Flynn?
3. What does Mrs. Muller want Sister Aloysius to do? What does she mean when she says, "Sometimes things aren't black and white"?
4. What is Sister Aloysius' response to Mrs. Muller's statement? What does Sister Aloysius threaten to do? Why?

By Marcia Aubineau
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Character Chart

A POST-PLAY ACTIVITY

Objective

To allow students to discover both conflict and commonality between the characters. By creating a visual chart showing this, students can come to understand people who hold different views of religion and children.

Time Allotted

20-30 minutes

Materials

Graphic organizer

Character description sheet

Scenes to read out loud (optional), pages 13-23 of this guide

Procedure

Go over the character descriptions as a class. Discuss with students what adjectives might describe each character or if they may remind them of someone in their own lives and why. If you are doing this after “Scenes to Read Aloud,” you may want to refer students back to the scenes to help them get a better picture of some of the characters. Allow students to work individually or in small groups on the organizer.

Discussion

Once completed, use the questions below to guide students in understanding their findings.

1. What belief do all characters share? Why is this important?
2. What are some major differences the characters have? Why do you think they have these differences?
3. Which character(s) do you think have the most power? How might this help some characters and harm others?
4. Where does their power come from? Are there different kinds of power?
5. Who has the least amount of power? Why do you think that is?

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Character Chart: A Post-Play Activity

CONTINUED

Directions: For each bolded box, describe the appropriate character. In the larger boxes compare and contrast the characters, describing beliefs they share and beliefs they don't share. When you are finished, answer the questions below.

Beliefs shared: <hr/> <hr/> Beliefs not shared: <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	Sister James <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	Beliefs shared: <hr/> <hr/> Beliefs not shared: <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Father Flynn <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	Beliefs shared: <hr/> <hr/> Beliefs not shared: <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	Sister Aloysius <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Beliefs shared: <hr/> <hr/> Beliefs not shared: <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	Mrs. Muller <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	Beliefs shared: <hr/> <hr/> Beliefs not shared: <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

What beliefs do all the characters share? What are some big differences? How do you think these similarities and differences shape the play?

By Maggie Quam
HMONG COLLEGE PREP ACADEMY

The Author's Preface to the Play

A POST-PLAY ACTIVITY

Note to the Teacher: We have included the author's Preface here because we believe that in it he expresses the philosophical foundation of the play. We suggest that following the performance you and your students read the Preface together, using the questions we have inserted to guide your exploration of the play either in discussion or as a reflective writing exercise.

Preface to *Doubt, A Parable*

What's under a play? What holds it up? You might as well ask what's under me? On what am I built? There's something silent under every person and under every play. There is something unsaid under any given society as well.

There's a symptom apparent in America right now. It's evident in political talk shows, in entertainment coverage, in artistic criticism of every kind, in a religious discussion. We are living in a courtroom culture. We *were* living in a celebrity culture, but that's dead. Now we're only interested in celebrities if they're in court. We are living in a culture of extreme advocacy, of confrontation, of judgment, and of verdict. Discussion has given way to debate. Communication has become a contest of wills. Public talking has become obnoxious and insincere. Why? Maybe it's because deep down under the chatter we have come to a place where we know that we don't know ... anything. But nobody's willing to say that.

Let me ask you. Have you ever held a position in an argument past the point of comfort? Have you ever defended a way of life you were on the verge of exhausting? Have you ever given service to a creed you no longer utterly believed? Have you ever told a girl you loved her and felt the faint nausea of eroding conviction? I have. That's an interesting moment. For a playwright, it's the beginning of an idea. I saw a piece of real estate on which I might build a play, a play that sat on something silent in my life and in my time. I started with a title: *Doubt*.

What is Doubt? Each of us is like a planet. There's a crust, which seems eternal. We are confident about who we are. If you ask, we can readily describe our current state. I know my answers to so many questions, as do you. What was your father like? Do you believe in God? Who's your best friend? What do you want? Your answers are your current topography, seemingly permanent, but deceptively so. Because under that face of easy response, there is another You. And this wordless Being moves just as the instant moves; it presses upward without explanation, fluid and wordless, until the resisting consciousness has no choice but to give way.

Questions for Discussion

1. What might be "unsaid" in our society today? In your school? In your family?
2. Why might a topic be deliberately designated as something not to be talked about? How is that decided? What might happen if someone breaks the silence?
3. Explain Shanley's metaphor likening each of us to a planet.
4. Explain his reference to the "wordless Being" that is "another You." How is this Being "fluid"?

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The Author's Preface: A Post-Play Activity

CONTINUED

It is Doubt (so often experienced initially as weakness) that changes things. When a man feels unsteady, when he falters, when hard-won knowledge evaporates before his eyes, he's on the verge of growth. The subtle or violent reconciliation of the outer person and the inner core often seems at first like a mistake, like you've gone the wrong way and you're lost. But this is just emotion longing for the familiar. Life happens when the tectonic power of your speechless soul breaks through the dead habits of the mind. Doubt is nothing less than an opportunity to reenter the Present.

The play. I've set my story in 1964, when not just me but the whole world seemed to be going through some kind of vast puberty. The old ways were still dominant in behavior, dress, morality, world view, but what had been the organic expression had become a dead mask. I was in a Catholic church school in the Bronx, run by the Sisters of Charity. These women dressed in black, believed in Hell, obeyed their male counterparts, and educated us. The faith, which held us together, went beyond precincts of religion. It was a shared dream we agreed to call Reality. We didn't know it, but we had a deal, a social contract. We would all believe the same thing. We would all believe.

Looking back, it seems to me, in those schools at that time, we were an ageless unity. We were all adults, and we were all children. We had, like many animals, flocked together for warmth and safety. As a result, we were terribly vulnerable to anyone who chose to hunt us. When trust is in the order of the day, predators are free to plunder. And plunder they did. As the ever widening Church scandals reveal, the hunters had a field day. And the shepherds, so invested in the surface, sacrificed actual good for perceived virtue.

I have never forgotten the lessons of that era, nor learned them well enough. I still long for a shared certainty, an assumption of safety, the reassurance of believing that others know better than me what's for the best. But I have been led by the bitter necessities of an interesting life to value that age-old practice of the wise: Doubt.

There is an uneasy time when belief has begun to slip but the hypocrisy has yet to take hold, when the consciousness is disturbed but not yet altered. It is the most dangerous, important, and ongoing 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.

5. Why does Shanley think that doubt causes growth?
6. What does he mean by doubt being "an opportunity to reenter the Present"?
7. What does Shanley mean when he says that his community agreed to a "shared dream" and called it "Reality"?
8. Does our society today have a "shared dream"? Does your school or your family have one?
9. Explain Shanley's argument that "the moment of Doubt" is the moment when a person renews their humanity or becomes a lie.
10. Can you identify examples of this happening in our society today?

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The Author's Preface: A Post-Play Activity

CONTINUED

Doubt requires more courage than conviction does, and more energy; because conviction is a resting place and doubt is infinite -- it is a passionate exercise. You may want to be sure. Look down on that feeling. We've got to learn to live with a full measure of uncertainty. There is no last word. That's the silence under the chatter of our time.

*John Patrick Shanley
Brooklyn, New York
March 2005*

11. Why would Shanley say that having doubt is more courageous than believing something with certainty? What does he mean when he refers to conviction as a "resting place"? How might his observation be illustrated in the events of today's news? Who are the "doubters" and who are the people who are absolutely sure their view is the only valid one?
12. Shanley has written this play to encourage his audience to doubt. What doubts might the characters have at the end of the play? What doubts might the audience have? Why do you think Shanley believes it is so important to have the audience examine or experience doubt? Do you agree or disagree with him in regards to the importance of doubt?

By Dr. Kirsten Pardun-Johannsen

ORONO SCHOOLS

The Habit of Belief

A POST-PLAY REFLECTION

Habit. 1. A constant, often unconscious inclination to perform some act, acquired through its frequent repetition. 2. An established trend of the mind or character. 3. A distinctive dress or costume, especially of a religious order.

How does one shed a “habit” of thought, especially if one “in-habits” his or her ideology daily through the very clothes one wears? What is the risk to self-identity when one is challenged to interrogate the ideology her identity is based on, especially if that identity is based on faith, which in turn is rooted by definition in the irrational?

The dichotomy between faith and reason has provoked discussion and debate within the Christian church since its inception. St. Thomas Aquinas explored the problem in his *De Summa Theologica*, and his conclusion was that faith must inevitably trump reason; otherwise, the consequence was “anathema” to those who rely only on the mind to explain the physical and metaphysical workings of the universe.

John Patrick Shanley’s play *Doubt, A Parable* tackles this debate head-on, offering us a representative of the Catholic clergy whose inter-personal struggles represent a clash of ideologies—of “habits” of thought—and the effect of that clash on her view of self.

Sister Aloysius Beauvier represents the traditional Catholic, pre-Vatican II world view. Clothed throughout the play in her floor-length black habit, her black bonnet, and her rimless glasses, she personifies the iconic figure of the strict school mistress who thinks subjects like Art and Music are a waste of time, ball point pens are an “easy choice,” a “restless mind” is “not good,” and boys are made of “gravel, soot, and tar paper.” She sees her role as that of a “fierce moral guardian” for her students and follows the credo that “The heart is warm, but the wits must be cold.”

Her students are “uniformly terrified” of her, and she wants it that way, perceiving her role as proactive in preventing them (or anyone else) from straying from the straight and narrow. She wraps the rose bush in burlap early in the season “to protect it from the frost” because if the frost comes first, “it’s too late.” She must be vigilant because she “can’t wait for something to happen,” and she is absolutely sure she is always right.

The main target of her righteous indignation is Father Brendan Flynn whom she suspects of being a pedophile and of attempting to cultivate “an improper relationship” with one Donald Muller, the school’s only black student—a recent enrollee who is friendless and to whom Father Flynn has become a “protector.” When Sister Aloysius finds out that Donald behaved strangely after having had a private conversation with Flynn, she jumps to the conclusion that something is wrong, and when Sister James further informs her that there was alcohol on Donald’s breath, Sister Aloysius labels Flynn as “the wolf” and declares, “I’ll bring him down.” She persists in her relentless pursuit of Flynn throughout the play even after Donald’s mother begs her to leave things alone, explaining that the boy’s father “would kill that child over a thing like this.”

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The Habit of Belief

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Mrs. Muller pleads, “Sometimes things aren’t black and white,” to which Sister Aloysius responds, “And sometimes they are. I’ll throw your son out of this school. Make no mistake....Because I will stop this whatever way I must.” Sister Aloysius is willing to sacrifice Donald in the name of getting rid of Father Flynn so, she says, the priest can’t hurt other boys: “It won’t end with your son. There will be others, if there aren’t already.”

Is Sister Aloysius’ adamant pursuit of what she perceives as a threat to her male students a result of her perception of herself as a “fierce moral guardian”? Is it a personal vendetta against Father Flynn because she disapproves not only of his post-Vatican II liberal attitudes but also of his “sweet tooth” and long nails? Or is it perhaps an unconscious retaliation against the patriarchy of the priesthood? She mentions several times in the play that although “there’s a chain of command,” she doesn’t trust it to do the right thing: “Here, there’s no man I can go to” because the monsignor (an elderly priest she suspects is senile) would only back Father Flynn against her. Even Mrs. Muller observes, “You’re not going against no *man* in a *robe* and win, Sister.”

In the end, win she does; however, by winning the battle, she loses the war—Flynn resigns his position at St. Nicholas but is promoted to be the pastor of the St. Jerome Church and School. Sister Aloysius still seems certain of his guilt and his sexual “inclination,” but she’s been out-maneuvered by the male hierarchy. She, who earlier stated, “It is my job to outshine the fox” has fallen victim to her own cleverness. And what has happened to her “habit”—her faith in the Church and its rules, its justice? What has happened to her humanity in the process of adhering to dogma all these years? She says more than once that “In the pursuit of wrongdoing, one steps away from God. Of course there’s a price.” What price has she paid?

At the end of the play, she confesses, “I have doubts. I have such doubts.” And we are left with doubts too—about her motivations, about the “mortal sin” she confesses to having committed (a “mortal sin” being, according to Catholic doctrine, one which causes spiritual death), about the ideology that has informed her actions throughout. Does she doubt that she took the right course of action with Father Flynn? Does she doubt that Flynn perhaps wasn’t trying to seduce the boy? Or does her doubt dwell on her faith itself, her habit of belief? Throughout the play, she represents the old order of Catholicism, and Father Flynn represents the new with his views that the Church needs a “more familiar face” and children need compassion more than rules. Are we then to see her as symbolizing many believers at the time of Vatican II who felt cast adrift as the Pope shifted the 2,000 year old paradigm of what it meant to believe and act as a Catholic?

At one point Sister Aloysius remarks that elderly Sister Veronica is going blind, and she admonishes Sister James to look after her and “see that she doesn’t destroy herself.” Later we learn that Sister Veronica has indeed fallen, and Sister Aloysius remarks, “Nuns fall, you know.... It’s the habit. It catches us up more often than not. What with our being in black and white, and so prone to falling, we’re more like dominoes than anything else.”

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The Habit of Belief

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In his Preface to the play, Shanley asks, “Have you ever defended a way of life you were on the verge of exhausting? Have you ever given service to a creed you no longer utterly believed?” Is the source of Sister Aloysius’ doubt rational or spiritual? The answer remains itself in doubt, and the audience leaves the theater pondering not only the root of her uncertainty but perhaps calling into question some of their own habits of belief. Shanley says that “Life happens when the tectonic power of your speechless soul breaks through the dead habits of the mind. Doubt is nothing less than an opportunity to reenter the Present.” At the end of the play we are left with the question of whether Sister Aloysius will be able to step beyond her ideology of seeing the world in terms of black and white or remain incarcerated in the habit of belief her garments represent.

Shanley wrote the play as part of a trilogy, the goal of which was to examine the American character. In his Preface, he observes that “we are living in a courtroom culture” in which “communication has become a contest of wills” and that under all the chatter of public discourse we may have “come to a place where we know that we don’t know...anything.” Do we see doubt as threatening to our American ideology or as an opportunity to grow? How does our current political climate reflect this conflict? Shanley closes the Preface with the observation that “doubt requires more courage than conviction does...because conviction is a resting place.” Do we as a culture have the courage it takes to interrogate our values and attitudes or are our habits of belief, like those of Sister Aloysius, so hardened that we are unable to change?

By Marcia Aubineau
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