
Moral Dilemmas in John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt*

In the preface to his 2004 Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Doubt*, American playwright John Patrick Shanley (1950-) argues that to experience doubt, regardless of whether it relates to one's own actions and convictions, or those of others, requires more courage than certainty. *Doubt*, he asserts, is "a passionate exercise," requiring genuine thought and questioning, whereas certainty is merely a convenient "resting place" for complacent individuals (ix).

Moreover, society suffers, Shanley argues, when individuals act in the first instance on the basis of their convictions rather than on the basis of proof. He cites the United States' 2003 invasion of Iraq as such an example, and "a stimulus" to the creation of his play. In Bush's "rush to war," he asserts, differing views on the legitimacy of the invasion were not considered, and those "who expressed doubts were . . . depicted as unpatriotic." To Shanley, this "bizarre" rejection of doubt is "symptomatic" of a current malaise in contemporary society: the need for easy answers (1).

In *Doubt* (renamed *Doubt: A Parable* in its 2005 printed edition), it is tempting to regard the character of Sister Aloysius Beauvier, a deeply conservative head nun in 1964 New York City, as Shanley's representation of President Bush. Like the former president, she is unswayable in her belief that her unproven suspicions are correct. Proceeding from merely a hunch, Sister Aloysius quickly becomes convinced that the popular young parish priest, Father Flynn, is a sexual predator, and the play centers on her ultimately successful efforts to drive the priest away from the Catholic school of which she is principal, and the adjoined church over which he presides. The Bronx establishment in question, St. Nicholas, also employs the kind but naïve novice nun, Sister James, whose possibly innocent observation that Father Flynn serves as "a protector" to St. Nicholas's only African-American student, the unseen Donald Muller, confirms Sister Aloysius' suspicions (19-20).

Sister Aloysius, Father Flynn and Sister James comprise the three principal characters in the play. The fourth and final character is Donald's mother, Mrs. Muller, whose appearance in Scene VIII forces Sister Aloysius to reflect for the first time on the implications of her "campaign" against Father Flynn. This article examines how Shanley eschews definitive answers in *Doubt*, creating moral dilemmas for his audiences/readers as he alternately invites and discourages sympathy toward his characters and their motivations.

The Characters of *Doubt*, and the Dilemmas That Their Actions Present

Sister Aloysius

Sister Aloysius initially appears a stereotypical creation: "the stock character beloved of all Catholic dissenters: the zealous, brittle, parochial school principal" (Bogle 1). Shanley avoids making her a caricature, however, revealing throughout the play aspects of her life and personality that defy the stereotype of the humorless, Luddite head nun. Late in the play, he also reveals her vulnerability. On two occasions, her mask of certainty slips: first, she is visibly upset after her Scene VIII encounter with Mrs Muller (50); second, her closing lines, spoken while she is "bent with emotion," constitute the unsettling admission that, "I have doubts! I have

such doubts!” (58).

But to what is she referring? Having driven Father Flynn from the parish with her threats to expose him, does she now doubt her conviction about the priest’s guilt? Or, rather, is she reproaching herself for merely ridding St. Nicholas of a guilty man while allowing him the opportunity to reoffend at another parish? Equally feasibly, Sister Aloysius’ anguish at the end of the play could allude to her questioning of the effectiveness of her church, and its ability to deal with sexual predators, or even her belief in God himself.

A further possibility, and arguably the most likely explanation for her emotional outburst, is her doubt about the methods that she has employed to facilitate Father Flynn’s resignation from St. Nicholas. Immediately preceding her admission of doubt, Sister Aloysius tells Sister James for the second time in the play that the end justifies the means when dealing with the perpetrators of crime: “In the pursuit of wrongdoing, one steps away from God.” She acknowledges this time, however, that, “Of course there’s a price” (58).

Part of that price is breaking the ninth of the Ten Commandments by lying, as Sister Aloysius brazenly does in Scene VIII, for example, when she tells Father Flynn that she has telephoned a nun from his previous parish and discovered that he has, as she puts it, “a history” (53). She also violates another of her oaths as a nun: the vow of obedience to her superiors. As she tells Father Flynn: “I will step outside the Church if that’s what needs to be done! . . . You should understand that, or you will mistake me” (54).

While, ultimately, Sister Aloysius does not “step outside the Church,” her courage in directly confronting her direct superior is never in doubt. But is it misplaced? After all, Sister Aloysius has no evidence to support her “certainty” that Father Flynn is a pedophile. Her suspicions are founded on two incidents alone: first, she witnesses one of St. Nicholas’s incorrigible truants, William London, pulling his wrist away from Father Flynn on the first day of school (52), and, second, she learns from Sister James that Donald Muller, on returning to his classroom after a rectory meeting with Father Flynn on one occasion, had “alcohol on his breath” (22).

Mrs. Muller

To Sister Aloysius, however, these isolated incidents are sufficient reason to summon Mrs. Muller to her office. Hoping to enlist her support in reporting Father Flynn to the authorities, she is dismayed when Mrs. Muller not only insists that Donald has “been himself” of late, but also praises Father Flynn for “watching out for him.” Moreover, when confronted with Sister Aloysius’ allegation that, “Father Flynn may have made advances on [her] son,” Mrs. Muller emphasizes the nun’s lack of certainty: “May have made.” Indeed, her only concern is that her son be allowed to remain at the School until his graduation the following June, at which point he will have “a better chance of getting into a good high school,” with the possibility of being able to go to university after that (44-6).

This is not the response that Sister Aloysius wishes to hear, and Shanley then emphasizes the extent of her zealotry when she threatens to derail Donald’s future unless the latter confirms her allegations: “I’ll throw your son out of this school. Make no mistake. . . . I will stop this whichever way I must” (49). This threat poses a moral dilemma to the audience: assuming that Sister Aloysius’ allegations about Father Flynn are even correct, is it justifiable to punish the victim on the basis that his refusal to speak out against his abuser may result in other similar

cases occurring?

Not content with this question, Shanley produces a further moral dilemma arising from “one of the play’s most powerful reversals” (Gallicho 22). When told by Sister Aloysius that Father Flynn is “after the boys,” Mrs. Muller responds simply: “Well, maybe some of them boys want to get caught” (Shanley 48). Even more shockingly from Sister Aloysius’ perspective, Mrs. Muller goes on suggest a justification for Father Flynn’s interest in her son, irrespective of its motive, on the basis that it is beneficial to Donald:

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. (49)

With this scene, “Doubt turns every dramatic commonplace on its head. Even when you expect the parent of a victim to be the most scandalized, Shanley pulls the rug out from under you” (Gallicho 22). That metaphorical rug is also pulled out from under Sister Aloysius, who is ultimately forced to concede that there is nothing that Mrs. Muller can do for her (Shanley 49). Moreover, her “shaken” reaction to Mrs. Muller’s parting observation that, “You may think you’re doing good, but the world’s a hard place” (50) suggests that she is already experiencing doubt about her approach.

Father Flynn and Sister James

Shanley’s characterization of Father Flynn also ensures that many in the audience will have misgivings about the priest’s forced departure at the end of Scene VIII. Throughout the play, the gregarious, likable Flynn displays apparently genuine compassion for his parish, reassuring his congregation in Scene I that those experiencing a “crisis of faith . . . are not alone” (6). In contrast with Sister Aloysius’ disdain for the notion of closer ties with the community, the liberal Flynn is a self-declared supporter of inclusiveness. He also displays a mischievous sense of humor, exchanging knowing looks with Sister James when Sister Aloysius denounces the harmless “Frosty the Snowman” as a “disturbing” song (29).

Flynn’s resignation occurs as a direct result of Sister Aloysius’ aforementioned lie that she has spoken to a nun at his previous parish and learned his “history.” Although Flynn’s abrupt decision to leave St. Nicholas shortly afterwards appears to be an acknowledgement of his guilt, one can equally argue that he has no choice but to resign from St. Nicholas, given that the mere suggestion of impropriety on his part would destroy his reputation.

Ironically, Father Flynn’s forced resignation would not have happened without the assistance of Sister James, who more often than not in the play states that she believes in his innocence. Yet she is the character who first alerts Sister Aloysius to Flynn’s interest in Donald; prior to this revelation, the older nun is merely suspicious of the priest because of William London’s reaction to him. Though caring about her students and earnest, with “a bit of sunshine in her heart” (7), Sister James demonstrates a lack of courage in her convictions when, after effectively igniting Sister Aloysius’ campaign against Father Flynn with her observations about his behavior, she is unwilling to be a party to the nun’s resulting pursuit of the priest. There is also more than a grain of truth to Sister Aloysius’ criticism of Sister James that she is too quick to believe in Father Flynn’s innocence (after his explanation in Scene IV about Donald’s visit to

the rectory) because “it’s easier to believe him” (35). In fact, like Shanley’s audience, Sister James is clearly unsure what to believe about Father Flynn, and her references in Scenes VII and IX about being unable to sleep at nights point to a conflicted soul. “Maybe we’re not supposed to sleep so well,” Sister Aloysius, another self-confessed bad sleeper responds in the latter scene (58), reminding the reader of the quote with which the published edition of *Doubt: A Parable* begins: “The bad sleep well” (4).

Doubt: A Parable, as its creator has often sought to emphasize, is not a parable about the Catholic Church. Rather, it is a parable about the elusiveness of certainty, and, specifically, the dangers of rushing to judgment in the absence of proof. Indeed, Shanley insists that its central question is really: “Are people willing to live with a certain amount of doubt as part of a rational, mature concept of life?” (qtd in Gardner 1). Clearly, Sister Aloysius is not. She will allow no doubts to contaminate her certitude that Father Flynn is a sexual predator, despite the latter’s passionate plea that, “Even if you feel certainty, it is an emotion and not a fact” (Shanley 55). Ironically, however, by the end of the play, her own seemingly indestructible certitude has crumbled, as she admits for the first time to possessing doubts of her own.

Yet true to Shanley’s eschewal of easy answers, we can only theorize as to the nature of those doubts, which remain as elusive as the truth about the innocence or guilt of Father Flynn. Moreover, Mrs. Muller, in her extraordinary and unsettling speech to Sister Aloysius, forces us to consider whether her son is necessarily a victim if the nun’s suspicions about the relationship between Donald and Flynn are indeed correct. Is Mrs. Muller simply a realist who knows the harsh ways of the world, as she tells Sister Aloysius, or is her viewpoint morally indefensible? Again, Shanley forces us to reflect on our own values.