

## **“Progressive Education and a Welcoming Church”: Vatican II, Feminism, and Sister Aloysius’s Uncertainty in John Patrick Shanley’s *Doubt***

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John Patrick Shanley sets his play *Doubt: A Parable* in the early 1960s, during the initial implementation of the Second Ecumenical Council, or Vatican II, which represented a radical shift in the Catholic Church’s operation. According to Avery Dulles, “[Vatican II’s] champions... see it as having liberated Catholics from... oppression... Its detractors blame it for shattering the unity and order of the church and introducing an era of contestation and doubt” (“Vatican II: The Myth and the Reality” 7). In the same historical moment, second-wave feminists fought for equal rights with men to break down gendered binaries and hierarchies, which Sister Aloysius imitates, though perhaps unconsciously. Shanley portrays the simultaneous impact of Vatican II and the Women’s Liberation Movement in *Doubt* through the relations between Sister Aloysius, Sister James, and Father Flynn. I will argue that Sister Aloysius persecutes Father Flynn not because he may have committed a crime, but because he embodies the recent changes and ongoing restrictions within the church—changes and restrictions that cause her to doubt the validity of her personal opinions and prevent her from achieving equality with her male counterparts. She pursues Father Flynn—who avowedly practices the ideas of Vatican II and who has patriarchal authority over her—to prove to herself the superiority of her own ideas and to put an end to her doubts. However, once she successfully removes Father Flynn from the school where she is principal, Sister Aloysius realizes that his version of the church is not so easily overcome. This realization throws her into deeper uncertainty rather than restoring her conviction. Shanley emphasizes the political complexities of Sister Aloysius’s position as a conservative nun who nevertheless chafes against patriarchal authority by contrasting her with a younger novice, Sister James, and by using stage settings to suggest the limitations of women’s power in the church. First, he compounds Sister Aloysius’s

uncertainty through Sister James, who, during the play's progression, comes to represent broader church opinion on the issues at hand and who ultimately believes Father Flynn's innocence and his ideas about the future of the church. Second, Shanley uses the setting of the garden between the rectory and the convent to illustrate the difficulties that Sister Aloysius faces as she tries to undermine a male superior in an institution that, regardless of other changes, continues to position women below men.

Sister Aloysius regards the message of the Second Ecumenical Council warily, whereas Father Flynn adopts it whole-heartedly, causing Sister Aloysius to distrust him, as he opposes her and the rules she has established in her school. Even without the context of Vatican II, Shanley makes clear that Sister Aloysius distrusts—and even despises—change and warmth, qualities which Father Flynn embodies. She sees Sister James's reticence to send her students to Sister Aloysius's office for punishment as indicative of something amiss with her class (Shanley 8). This tendency to favour castigation over other methods of instruction puts Sister Aloysius at odds with Vatican II. At the opening of the council, "Pope John XXIII... declared that [the Church] would best meet the needs of [the] time 'by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations'" (Dulles, "Myth" 8). Sister Aloysius does not share this view about punishment, which Father Flynn points out by identifying her as a "disciplinarian" (Shanley 1.5) while aligning himself with conciliar ideas.

Shanley portrays Sister Aloysius's attachment to preconconciliar ideas and Father Flynn's promotion of change through simple details like their chosen writing instruments, which imply broader philosophical incongruities. Sister Aloysius's choice to forego ballpoint pens becomes key to her character when she professes regret for "allow[ing] even cartridge pens into the school" (9). She believes that "[p]enmanship is dying" as a result of new pen technology and perceives progress in general as injurious rather than beneficial to her students (1.2). She connects Father Flynn's use of a ballpoint pen to the corrupting influence of modernity, which pro-

motes “the easy way out” (1.5, 1.2). This viewpoint contradicts Vatican II, which stemmed from a belief that “Catholics had spent too long lamenting the errors of the modern world and were in danger of isolating themselves, to the detriment of the church’s mission” (Dulles, “Vatican II: Substantive Teaching” 14). Sister Aloysius looks down on secular culture, preferring that the Church separate itself from laypeople—another point that separates her and Father Flynn, who suggests that they sing a secular song at the Christmas pageant (Shanley 1.5).

From the beginning, Sister Aloysius demonstrates concern about the disparity between her values and the direction in which the world and the Church are moving. Shanley indicates that Sister Aloysius has doubts long before she admits them aloud by showing her drifting off “absently” into her own thoughts while instructing Sister James on strictness (1.9, 1.2). When Sister James comes to see her about William London’s nosebleed, Sister Aloysius questions the boy’s honesty, suggesting that the nosebleed was perhaps “[s]elf-induced” (1.2). Just as she begins to expound on discipline and intimidation, she “[p]ause[s]” and “star[es] absently at Sister James,” who awakens her from this reverie by asking, “[is] something the matter?” (1.2). Upon hearing her inquiry, Sister Aloysius responds negatively and turns the question back onto Sister James. Finally, after hearing the other woman repeat her denial, albeit more hesitantly, Sister Aloysius concludes, “[t]hen nothing’s the matter then” (1.2). This repetition of the word “then” demonstrates her agitation and indicates that she fears someone might detect her doubts even if their cause remains a mystery. Sister Aloysius inadvertently suggests the source of her anxiety in her next lines when she mentions William London’s ballpoint pen (1.2), tying her momentary preoccupation to her anxieties about progress. She uses the pen to shift the conversation back to discipline, but she connects it and its broader implications with her lapse into abstraction simply by mentioning it so shortly afterwards.

Sister Aloysius speaks explicitly about doubt later in the same scene between herself and Sister James and connects Father Flynn with

her pre-existing uncertainty. She asks, “sermons come from somewhere, don’t they? Is Father Flynn in Doubt, is he concerned that someone else is in Doubt?” (1.2). These questions offer insight into how Sister Aloysius sees the priest: she wonders if he suspects her uncertainty, but she cannot decipher exactly what he means without an outside opinion. Whereas normally Sister Aloysius demonstrates complete confidence in her opinions and thrusts them onto Sister James, Sister Aloysius now requires affirmation and consults with her. Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn view the world and the Church very differently, and his ideas appear somewhat enigmatic to her as a result. She worries about the exposure of her doubts, but, more importantly, she identifies Father Flynn as a source of uncertainty alongside her other concerns about progress and corruption.

Shanley illustrates the changes in the Church with allusions to the wind wreaking havoc in the garden between the convent and the rectory. After Sister Aloysius begins pursuing Father Flynn, the wind begins blowing and becomes progressively more violent as the play continues (1.4). Shanley uses an unstoppable force of nature to imply that, rail against it as she might, Vatican II has already altered her school and the rest of the Church and that her efforts will be in vain. Additionally, the wind knocks a tree branch onto the garden path, tripping Sister Veronica, who is going blind (1.5). This incident concretizes Sister Aloysius’s lack of foresight in the face of the changes around her. She does not see that Vatican II—which Shanley depicts through the wind—has already begun to replace the old system. Unlike Sister James, who finds an alternate, if less convenient, route to avoid the fallen branch (1.5), Sister Aloysius continues in her established routine even though, like Sister Veronica, the changes obstruct her habitual path. Furthermore, in one of Father Flynn’s sermons, the wind scatters feathers irretrievably and thus prevents a gossiping woman, a thinly veiled version of Sister Aloysius, from regaining peace of mind by atoning for her misdeeds (1.6). Although Father Flynn intends explicitly to condemn gossip, he signals subtly that Sister Aloysius cannot reverse the wind and the changes it represents. His sermon condemns both her actions

and her conservatism.

In *Doubt*, Shanley depicts women's rights in relation to Catholicism through Sister Aloysius' interactions with Father Flynn and Mrs. Muller—the mother of the boy whom Sister Aloysius suspects Father Flynn has sexually abused. Both women know that Sister Aloysius is powerless so long as she follows the regulations of the Church. Mrs. Muller indicates Sister Aloysius's impotence against Father Flynn, saying, “[y]ou're not going against no *man* in a *robe* and win, Sister. He's got the position” (1.8). Although Father Flynn might mistreat her students, he is “not answerable” to Sister Aloysius, and so she must tell her suspicions to Monsignor Benedict, to whom Father Flynn is answerable (1.5). Unfortunately, he “would believe whatever Father Flynn told him” (1.4). In addition, “[t]he hierarchy of the Church does not permit [Sister Aloysius] going to the bishop” (1.4), thereby preventing her from acting at all. If she disagrees with her superiors, she has no means of redress. The Church's patriarchal hierarchy places nuns at the bottom and, were she to share her concerns with a superior, would take away any power that Sister Aloysius has to heed her own beliefs. Following the rules means relinquishing her power to men. Ultimately, Sister Aloysius crosses the garden to tell the monsignor of her suspicions but “[h]e d[oes] not believe [them] to be true” (1.9). Operating within the confines of the hierarchy, her efforts come to nothing. When discussing the increasing number of classes at the school taught by laypeople, Sister Aloysius sums up the problem by saying “[not] enough sisters” (1.2). This verbless sentence fragment reflects her inability to act and intimates a possible solution to her immediate problem. If she cannot find like-minded men, she must find—or invent—like-minded women. Sister Aloysius convinces Father Flynn to leave by pretending to have spoken to a nun at his last parish rather than going through proper channels and speaking with the pastor. Although she is his inferior, Sister Aloysius intimidates Father Flynn by uniting against him with another of his female inferiors. In order to assert herself, she operates outside of the Church's restrictive patriarchal rules. Therefore, although Sister Aloysius

does not consciously adopt feminist principles, which would contradict her distrust for progress, her actions allow for a feminist reading of the play.

The settings of different scenes, particularly the rectory and the garden, become part of Shanley's critique of gender roles and of the public/private dichotomy within the context of the Church's hierarchy. The garden is Sister Aloysius's domain, while she associates the rectory—out of bounds to women—with new ideas she cannot control and with destruction of what is familiar to her. In Scene IV, Sister James and Sister Aloysius are in the garden discussing their unpreparedness to instruct female students on womanhood while working in the garden (1.4); meanwhile, Father Flynn has taken the boys to the rectory to give them a talk on “[how] to be a man” (1.4). The contrast between what Flynn does without hesitation and what the nuns feel unable to do demonstrates the divide between ecclesiastical men and women. The organization of the Catholic Church allows men to learn about manhood and other such areas unrelated to their religious lives, while nuns must remain innocent. This discrepancy typifies the public/private dichotomy that Shanley highlights through geographic boundaries: the men interact with the world outside the Church while also ruling over the Church, while the nuns cannot leave their cloistered lives or even enter the rectory. The garden that separates the convent from the rectory is “forty feet across,” but, as Sister Aloysius points out, the nuns and priests “might as well be separated by the Atlantic Ocean” (1.4). At one point, she had “potter[ed] around out [in the garden]” but had to stop because of Monsignor Benedict's unpredictable schedule (1.4). Similarly, in Sister Aloysius' first meeting with Father Flynn, he usurps her in her own office by sitting at her desk (1.5), the symbol of her authority as principal. The nuns lose all authority when men are present and must put their superiors' desires above their own even in shared or private spaces like the garden and office. The garden, with its intimations of patriarchal bias, is also the setting for Sister Aloysius's final profession of doubt (1.9), thus tying the issue of gender inequality to her religious concerns.

Sister Aloysius projects her religious concerns onto Father Flynn

and pursues him not out of certainty of his guilt but rather to prove that the changes proposed in Vatican II might result in corruption. Whenever anyone suggests that Flynn does good in the community or the school, Sister Aloysius's professed certainty of his wrongdoing increases. Early in her conversation with Mrs. Muller, Sister Aloysius admits that she "can't be certain" (1.8), but after Mrs. Muller defends Father Flynn, she regains her confidence and says, "I know I'm right" (1.8). Regardless of his good deeds, Sister Aloysius sees Father Flynn as dangerous to her school for his approach rather than any particular action. She wants to use him to illustrate her correctness in the same way that she uses ballpoint pens to illustrate the consequences of progress, saying that they make students "write like monkeys" (1.2). By creating a scandal around Father Flynn, Sister Aloysius can illustrate the dangers of Vatican II. She "create[s] something by saying it" when she claims to be "concerned, perhaps needlessly, about matters in St. Nicholas School" to impressionable Sister James (1.2). It is unclear whether or not she has any impression of specific acts of Father Flynn's or whether her concerns are about new ideas and might be "needless" because she is not yet sure how to react to Vatican II. However, when Sister James comes to her with a vague suspicion (19–20)—which she suspects Sister Aloysius of having planted (39)—Sister Aloysius decides to act on it regardless of whether or not she believes it. In light of what Sister James has told her, Sister Aloysius re-evaluates Father Flynn's warmth to prove that it characterizes immorality, reinterpreting Father Flynn's otherwise innocent interaction with William London on the first day of school as a sexual advance (52). So long as Sister Aloysius fights against misconduct rather than directly against the Church, she can undermine Vatican II without explicitly confronting her religious doubts. However, these two ideas become so intertwined that, rather than separating her broader doubts from persecuting Father Flynn, she sees him as personifying these doubts and believes that only by eliminating him can she regain her religious conviction, staking her entire way of life on her campaign.

As a result, when Sister Aloysius finally succeeds in removing

Father Flynn from the parish, she loses her only means of reassuring herself of her own correctness and plunges into the complete uncertainty that she had attempted to ward off through her persecution of Father Flynn. Shanley shows that Sister Aloysius loses her fight against progress, despite seeming to have won, when Sister James believes Father Flynn. In order for her attack on Father Flynn to undermine Vatican II successfully, Sister Aloysius would need to persuade others of his guilt, but even Sister James, who brought the issue to light, chooses to believe him. Throughout the play, Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn vie for Sister James's support, forcing her to stand in for the opinion of the rest of the church in regards to Vatican II. While Sister Aloysius "discourages... warmth" and believes in "[r]ules," Father Flynn tells Sister James that "[c]hildren need warmth, kindness, understanding" (1.7). His ideas better match the "sunshine in [Sister James's] heart" than Sister Aloysius's do, making it easy for Sister James to believe him instead (1.2, 1.7). Much as Vatican II offered Catholics new freedoms, Father Flynn encourages Sister James to enjoy teaching rather than submit to Sister Aloysius's conservative regulations. In this way, Sister James's choice intimates how few people will choose the old rules over the new warmth and that Vatican II will permanently alter the Church, much to the chagrin of Sister Aloysius. The final scene of *Doubt* takes place on "a sunny day" (1.9)—making it seem that perhaps Sister Aloysius has defeated the winds of change, when in fact the weather has changed because the new system is more firmly established, not the reverse. The sunshine mimics the warmth of the progressive new church and calls to mind the "sunshine" in Sister James's heart, which has overcome the repression of reactionary Sister Aloysius and flourishes under new conditions (1.2).

Because she questions the Church's system and its new doctrine, which are ostensibly divinely inspired, Sister Aloysius begins to doubt God, about whom she had previously been certain. She hopes only to "[step] away from God" momentarily "[in] the pursuit of wrongdoing" (58), but her concerns about religion irreparably damage her faith when



she fails to prove herself right. As a nun, Sister Aloysius must believe that the Church legitimately represents God on earth. By disbelieving Vatican II, she undermines her devotion to the Church. Her doubts about the veracity of its teaching cause her to rebel against Church authority by going after progressive Father Flynn, thus distancing her from her role of “obedience” and putting her certainty at risk (1.8). She acts out of distrust for his philosophy rather than for Father Flynn himself, creating an opponent too large to be defeated; even when she succeeds on a small scale, her large-scale loss forces her to acknowledge her fundamental doubts, which have grown with her rebellion rather than being assuaged by it and have incapacitated her. When Father Flynn and his ideas are literally promoted within the Church and gain influence outside of Sister Aloysius’ jurisdiction (1.9), she realizes that her efforts only staved off a crisis of doubt temporarily. She crumbles, having staked her entire way of thinking—from fountain pens to religious convictions—on an unsuccessful campaign that was bound to fail.

*This paper was inspired in part by our class discussion of Sister Aloysius. We were divided into camps over whether or not she was right to accuse Father Flynn of wrong-doing. I wanted to write a paper that made that fact unimportant and focused on other types of doubt. I don’t remember how I came to look up Vatican II, but I did discover a public debate between a bishop and a cardinal (or something like that) over certain church statutes in a Catholic journal. It was interesting to read the articles in order and observe their scholarly argument.*

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Works Cited

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