

Doubt: A Parable



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY

John Patrick Shanley was born in New York City in 1950 and raised in The Bronx. He is the youngest of five siblings in an Irish-American family. As a boy and young man, he was known for making trouble in school, and was expelled from both kindergarten and high school. Later, he was put on academic probation at New York University, where he eventually earned an honors degree in Educational Theater. Since then, he has written numerous plays, including *Doubt: A Parable*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in addition to four Tony Awards. Shanley has also written films, such as *Moonstruck*, which came out in 1987, starred Nicolas Cage and Cher, and won three Academy Awards. He currently lives in New York City and has two adult sons.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There have been many cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by Catholic priests in both the 20th and 21st centuries. In the 1990s, these cases began to attract increasing scrutiny, which led to an investigation in 2002 by The Boston Globe's staff of investigative journalists. This investigation led to the book *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church*, which made it even clearer that the Catholic Church wasn't dealing with isolated instances of sexual abuse, but a wide-spread problem. Worse, the investigation revealed that the Catholic Church actively tried to hide many cases of abuse. On another note, Father Flynn makes a reference in *Doubt* to The Second Ecumenical Council, otherwise known as The Second Vatican Council. This was a conference that began in 1962 with the purpose of addressing the Catholic Church's relationship to contemporary times. In the Council's opening session, Pope John XXIII argued that the Church needed "new enthusiasm." In *Doubt*, Father Flynn points to this sentiment to insist that St. Nicholas Church and School should put on a "more familiar face," one that will resonate with the general public.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Doubt premiered two years after The Boston Globe's staff of investigative journalists published *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church*, the book that inspired the movie *Spotlight*. All three of these works examine the Catholic Church's systemic child abuse problem. While *Betrayal* and *Spotlight* focus on the outside perception of the Catholic Church and its various sexual scandals, *Doubt* tells a story about what it's like to stand up to child molesters from within the Church itself. In another

sense, *Doubt* is similar to Colum McCann's novel [Let the Great World Spin](#), which features a devoutly religious Irish man who in his middle age suddenly finds himself questioning—or reconsidering—his convictions, something that Father Flynn preaches about in *Doubt*. In addition, José Rizal's political novel [Noli Me Tangere](#) calls attention to the unchecked authority of Catholic friars who abused their power when the Philippines was under Spanish rule. Given that *Doubt* features a priest who evades responsibility for his alleged wrongs, Rizal's portrait of the potential dangers of religiously backed power systems is especially relevant.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Doubt: A Parable*
- **When Published:** Premiered on November 23, 2004 at the Manhattan Theatre Club
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** A Catholic church and school in the Bronx in 1964
- **Climax:** Confronting Father Flynn, Sister Aloysius lies and says that a nun from his previous parish told her that he has a history of sexually abusing young boys. She interprets his explosive reaction to mean that she's correct in her suspicion that he is a child molester.
- **Antagonist:** Father Flynn

EXTRA CREDIT

The Big Screen. In 2008, John Patrick Shanley adapted and directed *Doubt*, turning it into a movie starring Phillip Seymour Hoffman, Meryl Streep, Amy Adams, and Viola Davis.

Inspiration. John Patrick Shanley based the character of Sister James on Margaret McEntee, who was his teacher in Catholic school. McEntee later worked as the technical advisor for the film adaptation of *Doubt*.



PLOT SUMMARY

Father Flynn delivers a sermon at St. Nicholas School and Church in the Bronx in 1964. Addressing the idea of religious uncertainty, he tells a story about a cargo ship that sinks in the middle of the ocean. Everyone on board drowns except one man, who manages to build a makeshift raft. Looking up to the sky, the man navigates by the stars, using them to discern his way home. Not long after he sets his course, though, clouds appear and obscure the stars, making it impossible for him to know if he's still headed in the right direction. For 20 nights, the

sky remains starless, and he wonder if he has “seen Truth once, and now ha[s] to hold on to it without further reassurance.” Turning his attention to his listeners, Father Flynn says, “There are those of you in church today who know exactly the crisis of faith I describe. 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.”

The church in which Father Flynn delivers his sermon is also a Catholic school. One day, a young nun named Sister James visits Sister Aloysius in her office. Sister Aloysius is the school principal, and she lightly scolds Sister James for being a “very innocent person.” She urges James to be more suspicious and a harsher disciplinarian. She also asks why Sister James doesn’t send more students to the principal’s office, and James says that she likes to handle classroom situations on her own.

Sister Aloysius makes it clear that she’s committed to traditional methods of teaching. She then offers Sister James advice about how to conduct herself in class, critiquing her for being too easy on the children. Sister James admits that she wants her students to feel comfortable coming to her with their problems, but Sister Aloysius dismisses this idea, saying that it’s “more important they have a fierce moral guardian” than an adult confidante. Sister Aloysius then asks what Sister James thinks of Father Flynn, wondering aloud where he got his idea for his sermon about doubt. Before Sister James leaves, Sister Aloysius leans forward and asks if she has “noticed anything,” admitting that she herself is “concerned” about “matters in St. Nicholas School.” However, Sister James doesn’t know what she’s talking about, so Aloysius simply tells the younger woman to pay close attention to her class and to report anything that seems out of sorts.

Shortly thereafter, Sister James encounters Sister Aloysius in the garden. Aloysius asks James how Donald Muller is doing in school, and James says that he has “no friends” in class. Sister Aloysius also asks if anyone has hit Donald. When James says no, Aloysius says that someone surely will eventually. “I’m not so sure anyone will,” Sister James says, eventually adding that Father Flynn has become the boy’s “protector.” Hearing this, Sister Aloysius immediately stops what she’s doing and stands up. Sister James explains that Father Flynn has “taken an interest” in Donald ever since Donald joined the altar boys. “I thought I should tell you,” James says. “I told you to come to me, but I hoped you never would,” Aloysius replies, saying that she knew that things would be “set in motion” if James ever reported something like this to her. “So it’s happened,” she says. Sister James says, “I’m not even certain what you mean,” but Aloysius forces the younger woman to admit that she is suspicious of Father Flynn.

Sister James admits that she has been uncomfortable ever since Sister Aloysius instructed her to be more diligent and skeptical. “I want my peace of mind,” she says, suggesting that she feels “less close [to] God” now that she’s been trained to

think so cynically. Nevertheless, Aloysius tells her that she can’t have “peace of mind,” since it’s her job to protect the children. Aloysius then urges James to tell her more about what happened, and James admits that Donald Muller had alcohol on his breath after spending time alone with Father Flynn. Hearing this, Sister Aloysius decides that she and Sister James need to do something. However, she explains that she can’t simply take the news to Monsignor Benedict, who has the most power at the school. She knows Monsignor Benedict would simply ask Father Flynn about the incident and then naively believe anything he might say in his defense. As a result, Aloysius tells James that they will have to go directly to Father Flynn—an idea Sister James hates, since she herself hasn’t fully decided to pursue the matter. Nonetheless, Sister Aloysius hatches a plan to call Father Flynn to her office on the pretense of discussing something else. Then she will bring up the situation regarding Donald Muller.

Father Flynn comes to Sister Aloysius’s office before Sister James arrives. The nuns aren’t allowed to be alone with men, so he waits outside until Sister James appears, at which point they both enter and begin a discussion about the Christmas pageant. Father Flynn suggests that the children sing a secular song in addition to the traditional hymns. Sister James likes this idea, proposing that they sing “Frosty the Snowman.” Flynn agrees, but Sister Aloysius interrupts, saying that the song “espouses a pagan belief in magic” and is “heretical.” Father Flynn takes out a notebook to write down an idea for a sermon, explaining that he has to jot down his ideas so he doesn’t forget them. When Sister Aloysius asks what he’s writing, he says, “Intolerance.”

Sister Aloysius then says that they will all have to be careful about how “Donald Muller is used in the pageant,” since he is the school’s only black student. When Father Flynn says that he thinks Donald should be “treated like every other boy,” Sister Aloysius points out that he himself has “singled” Donald out for “special attention.” She then brings up the fact that Flynn had a “private meeting” with Donald in the rectory. Suddenly, Father Flynn senses that “something’s up,” so he asks what, exactly, Sister Aloysius is getting at. At this point, Aloysius reveals that Donald acted “strangely” after his meeting with Flynn. Before long, Flynn understands that Aloysius is suggesting that he has had inappropriate relations with Donald. Taking issue with Aloysius’s “tone,” he says that he’s “not answerable” to her. He then claims that he caught Donald drinking altar wine. Because Donald is the only black student at the school, he upholds, he decided not to tell anyone what happened. Now, though, he’s going to have to remove Donald from the altar boys, since news has gotten out about his drinking.

When Father Flynn leaves, Sister James is relieved. She wholeheartedly believes that he has told the truth, but Sister Aloysius isn’t so sure, thinking that believing him would be the “easy” way out of the situation. This bothers Sister James, but

Sister Aloysius simply picks up the phone and calls Donald Muller's mother, asking her to come to the school at her earliest convenience.

Shortly after his conversation with Sister Aloysius, Father Flynn delivers a sermon about the dangers of gossip. Around this time, he encounters Sister James in the garden and insists that he's innocent, claiming that Sister Aloysius is ruining his reputation simply because he has a softer and more contemporary approach to teaching. He insists that he has only tried to be supportive and compassionate, and this message resonates with Sister James, who says that she believes in his innocence.

Meanwhile, Sister Aloysius speaks with Mrs. Muller in her office. Mrs. Muller is worried that Donald is in trouble, since she's especially concerned that he does well in school. She explains that he simply needs to make it through June so that he can graduate the eighth grade and get into a good high school. When Sister Aloysius tells Mrs. Muller the real reason she wanted to talk to her, Mrs. Muller is hesitant to pursue the conversation. Thinking that Donald will get in trouble because of what Father Flynn has done, she makes it clear that she doesn't want to do anything about the situation. She then hints that Donald might be gay, but Sister Aloysius disregards this, wanting to focus only on Father Flynn's actions. When it becomes clear that Mrs. Muller won't do anything to stop the situation, though, Sister Aloysius says she will kick Donald out of school if that's what it takes to protect him. Mrs. Muller simply gets up and leaves, saying that she only wants what's best for Donald's future.

After Mrs. Muller leaves Sister Aloysius's office, Father Flynn enters in a rage. He tells Aloysius that she has no right to address this matter on her own. "You answer to us!" he yells. Still, she tells him that she called his former parish and spoke to a nun who told her that he abused a child there as well. This is a lie, but he doesn't know this, and his explosive reaction convinces Sister Aloysius that her suspicions have been correct all along. She also tells him that she will continue to call his former parishes until she finds parents who are willing to speak out against him. She then leaves him alone in the office, at which point he picks up the phone and calls the bishop.

Not long after her final confrontation with Father Flynn, Sister Aloysius sits in the garden with Sister James, who admits that she hasn't been able to sleep since she started thinking about Flynn's relationship with Donald. "Maybe we're not supposed to sleep so well," Aloysius says, adding, "They've made Father Flynn the pastor of St. Jerome. [...] It's a promotion." Going on, she says that she went to Monsignor Benedict after her final conversation with Flynn. "He did not believe it to be true," she says. She also tells James that she lied to Flynn in order to discern the truth, and when James expresses her surprise that she would sin in this way, Aloysius says, "In the pursuit of wrongdoing, one steps away from God. Of course there's a

price." Then, after thinking for a moment about the fact that Flynn has become a pastor, she says, "I have doubts! I have such doubts!"



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sister Aloysius – Sister Aloysius is a middle-aged nun who serves as the principal of St. Nicholas School. A strict disciplinarian, she is committed to what she sees as the traditional ways of running a Catholic school. Consequently, she urges Sister James to be a vigilant and unyielding teacher, insisting that the young woman needs to assert her authority over her students. This, Aloysius claims, is because the nuns can't be "complacent" when it comes to looking out for the children. In keeping with this determination to protect the students in her school, she also tells Sister James to tell her about anything that seems worthy of attention, adding that she herself has a sneaking suspicion that certain things are amiss at St. Nicholas School. After hearing Father Flynn's sermon about doubt, for instance, she worries that the priest is having troubled thoughts. When Sister James comes to her several days later and says that Father Flynn has taken a special interest in Donald Muller, then, she is quick to act, telling Sister James that they must investigate the situation on their own, since she knows that Monsignor Benedict won't help them discover whether or not Flynn is abusing Donald. Despite James's hesitation, Aloysius calls Flynn to her office and confronts him about the issue. However, Flynn only chastises her for not properly following the chain of command, since she's supposed to bring such matters up with Monsignor Benedict. Furthermore, Father Flynn denies Sister Aloysius's accusations. Nevertheless, Aloysius calls a meeting with Mrs. Muller, but even she doesn't want to get to the bottom of what's happening between her son and the priest. In her final conversation with Flynn, Aloysius lies by saying that she called his previous parish and discovered that he has a history as a sexual abuser. This enrages him, but before anything bad happens to him, he calls the bishop and secures a new position as a pastor at another school—a turn of events that causes Aloysius to doubt the morality of the Catholic Church.

Father Flynn – Father Flynn is a priest at St. Nicholas Church and School whom Sister Aloysius accuses of sexually abusing a student. Unlike Sister Aloysius, he believes that the Catholic Church needs to make an effort to be more progressive and relate to the general public. A generally well-liked and affable man, he takes an interest in the school's only black student, Donald Muller. When Donald returns to class with alcohol on his breath after spending time alone with Father Flynn, Sister James begins to worry, so she reports the incident to Sister Aloysius, who immediately believes that Flynn has established an inappropriate relationship with the boy. To address this, she

calls Flynn to her office, claiming that she and Sister James want to discuss the Christmas pageant. Believing that the pageants have become a bit “woebegone,” Flynn is more than willing to discuss the matter, even suggesting that the choir should sing a secular song—a suggestion Sister Aloysius frowns upon. When Father Flynn realizes that Aloysius has called him to her office to accuse him of abusing Donald Muller, he criticizes her for not going through the proper channels, reminding her that she should bring such complaints to Monsignor Benedict. In a conversation with Sister James shortly after this encounter, he makes an appeal to the young woman’s sensibilities, convincing her that he is—like her—a “compassion[ate]” man who only wants to support the students at St. Nicholas School. As a result, she decides to believe in his innocence. However, Sister Aloysius later lies that she’s contacted a nun at his former parish, and his angry reaction is enough to convince her that he truly *has* abused Donald. He continues to deny this, but he also begs her to treat him with sympathy. When she leaves the room, he picks up the phone and calls the bishop, who lets him move to a new parish, where he becomes the pastor—turning his transfer into a promotion. Though Flynn’s guilt is never confirmed nor denied, his ability to keep his position of authority (and indeed rise up in the Church) encourages the audience to see that institutions that concentrate power in the hands of a few may enable people to get away with immoral behavior.

Sister James – Sister James is a young nun at St. Nicholas School. A person with “sunshine in her heart,” she wants to be the kind of teacher students feel comfortable talking to about their problems. However, her generous disposition also contains a certain amount of innocence and naivety, which Sister Aloysius criticizes, encouraging Sister James to be more authoritative and discerning. Sister James tries to follow these instructions, but she finds it exhausting to be constantly suspicious, since doing so makes her feel less of a connection with God. Still, she agrees to be on the lookout for anything that seems amiss at St. Nicholas School, which is why she tells Sister Aloysius when her student Donald Muller comes to class with alcohol on his breath after spending time alone with Father Flynn. Having noticed Donald’s strange behavior, James informs Aloysius what happened and is horrified when the older woman immediately draws the conclusion that Flynn is sexually abusing Donald. “I’m not telling you that!” Sister James says. “I’m not even certain what you mean.” Despite her naivety, though, it’s clear to Aloysius that Sister James knows *exactly* what she means, and though James admits that she misses the “peace of mind” she had before becoming such a suspicious person, she goes along with Aloysius’s idea to confront Father Flynn. At the same time, though, she remains hesitant about accusing Flynn, which is why he’s eventually able to convince her that he’s innocent. And yet, she’s forced to face her own uncertainty when Sister Aloysius tells her that she’s proven to herself that Flynn has a history as a sexual abuser (though,

importantly, Aloysius doesn’t have definitive evidence). This troubles James, as does the fact that Aloysius had to lie to Flynn in order to get what she believes is the truth. However, Aloysius assures James that sometimes it’s necessary to commit a small sin in order to do a greater good.

Donald Muller – Donald Muller is an eighth grader at St. Nicholas School. The school’s first black student, Donald is new to St. Nicholas and—as a result—doesn’t have any friends. Sister James and Sister Aloysius talk about him rather frequently, as Aloysius asks James to give her updates about how he’s doing, since she thinks someone will eventually start bullying him. She thinks this, she explains, because not all of the families who send their children to St. Nicholas School are particularly open-minded when it comes to racial integration. However, Sister James says that none of the other students pick on Donald because Father Flynn has become his “protector.” This disconcerts Sister Aloysius, and Sister James adds that Donald acted a bit off in class one day after spending one-on-one time with Father Flynn in the rectory. Worse, Sister James smelled alcohol on the boy’s breath. Sister Aloysius jumps to the conclusions that Flynn has sexually abused Donald. But when she later tries to find out more about the situation by talking to Mrs. Muller, the boy’s mother is unwilling to pursue the matter, believing that it will be better for Donald if he simply finishes the year under the current circumstances. Sister Aloysius finds this abhorrent, but Mrs. Muller refuses to do anything, saying that Donald’s father beats him because he is most likely gay. She thinks that if it comes out that Flynn has molested Donald, this will only exacerbate her husband’s violence. As a result, she does nothing to help Donald, though Sister Aloysius manages to force Father Flynn to relocate. This upsets Donald, which is complicated by the fact that neither the audience nor the characters (besides Flynn and Donald) know for sure whether Flynn is truly guilty.

Mrs. Muller – Mrs. Muller is Donald’s mother. When she learns from Sister Aloysius that Father Flynn might be sexually abusing her son, she refuses to do anything about the situation. This is because she thinks doing something to stop Father Flynn will ultimately have a negative impact on Donald’s chances of graduating the eighth grade and getting into a good high school. She also suggests (to Sister Aloysius’s horror) that Father Flynn’s inappropriate attention might not be completely unwanted, since she suspects that Donald is gay. This, it seems, is a large part of why his father beats him, which serves as another reason Mrs. Muller doesn’t want it to get out that Father Flynn might have molested her son, since her husband will likely use this against him. Before leaving Sister Aloysius’s office, Mrs. Muller tells her that certain matters aren’t “black and white,” insisting that Donald will be better off if they simply do nothing—something Sister Aloysius is unwilling to do.

William London – William London is a student in Sister James’s class. When he gets a nosebleed at the beginning of the play,

Sister James sends him to Sister Aloysius's office. Sister Aloysius, in turn, sends him home, though she later tells Sister James that William may have given himself a nosebleed on purpose. This, Sister Aloysius says, is the kind of behavior that Sister James has to be on the lookout for.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Monsignor Benedict – Monsignor Benedict is the most powerful and influential figure at St. Nicholas Church and School. Unfortunately for Sister Aloysius, though, he is unwilling to use his power to challenge abusers like Father Flynn, instead protecting him by refusing to believe that he is a sexual abuser.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

In *Doubt*, a play about a catholic nun who suspects a priest of sexually abusing an altar boy, John Patrick Shanley suggests that people conceive of their moral responsibilities in different ways. Sister Aloysius, for one, sees it as her duty to find out whether or not Father Flynn has had inappropriate relations with the Catholic school's only black student, Donald Muller. Although she lacks concrete evidence, she refuses to dismiss the possibility that something immoral has taken place. In stark contrast to her determination, though, seemingly everyone around her would prefer to ignore this possibility. People like Sister James and even Donald's mother insist that blindly trusting Father Flynn is the right thing to do, despite the fact that this means possibly overlooking a deeply immoral act. Unsatisfied with this approach, Sister Aloysius does everything in her power to find out what really happened, believing that it has fallen to her to protect Donald. And though she ends up lying in order to confirm her suspicions, she assures Sister James that it is sometimes necessary to "step away from God" to "address wrongdoing." Consequently, Shanley implies that doing the right thing isn't always easy or even morally straightforward.

Although Sister James is the one who originally suggests that Father Flynn might have an inappropriate relationship with Donald Muller, it is Sister Aloysius who takes the matter seriously. Sister James, for her part, downplays the situation when she reports it to Sister Aloysius, but Sister Aloysius urges her to admit that she's suspicious of Father Flynn. "I want to be guided by you and responsible to the children, but I want my

peace of mind," James says to Sister Aloysius, explaining that Aloysius's influence on her has made her uncomfortable, since the older woman's "suspicion" has unsettled her. "I must tell you I have been longing for the return of my peace of mind," she adds. "You may not have it," responds Sister Aloysius. "It is not your place to be complacent. That's for the children. That's what we give them." By saying this, Sister Aloysius suggests that it is their job to be hypervigilant when it comes to caring for the children and ensuring their safety. This is their responsibility, regardless of whether or not it's unpleasant to be in a constant state of "suspicion."

Sister James is not the only person who feels uncomfortable accusing Father Flynn of wrongdoing. Even Donald's mother, Mrs. Muller, would prefer to ignore the possibility that her son is at risk. This is mostly because she's worried that pursuing the matter will keep her son from graduating the eighth grade and, as a result, prevent him from getting into a good high school. She's especially concerned about this because Donald is the school's only black student, so she doesn't want to do anything that might interfere with his chances of securing a good education and, in turn, upward mobility. "My son doesn't need additional difficulties. Let him take the good and leave the rest when he leaves this place in June," she says. This appalls Sister Aloysius, who finds it unfathomable that a mother would willingly turn a blind eye to her own son's abuse. "You accept what you gotta accept and you work with it," Mrs. Muller says, fearing that her son will be the one who gets in trouble if Sister Aloysius pursues this matter, not Father Flynn. Nevertheless, Sister Aloysius refuses to ignore what's happening, an indication that she believes certain injustices simply must be stopped, regardless of the potential fallout.

Sister Aloysius is willing to act on her suspicions because she believes there's more at stake than Donald Muller's academic future. Of course, she cares about Donald and doesn't necessarily agree that pursuing this matter will hurt him, but she's also focused on the fact that her failure to stop Father Flynn would enable him to abuse other children, too. "I'll throw your son out of this school," she tells Mrs. Muller when it becomes clear that Mrs. Muller doesn't want to do anything to help her son. "Because I will stop this whatever way I must," she adds. When Mrs. Muller accuses Sister Aloysius of "hurt[ing]" Donald just to "get [her] way," Sister Aloysius says, "It won't end with your son. There will be others, if there aren't already." In this moment, then, the audience sees why Sister Aloysius is so unwilling to overlook Father Flynn's monstrous behavior. For her, nothing could be more immoral than knowingly letting a rapist continue to abuse children. Accordingly, she will go to great lengths to fulfill what she sees as her ethical responsibility.

In keeping with her unflinching determination to protect her students, Sister Aloysius demonstrates that sometimes a person has to make compromises to do the right thing. For

instance, in her second confrontational conversation with Father Flynn, she discovers that her suspicions about him were correct, but she makes this discovery by telling a lie. Claiming to have called his former parishes, she says that she spoke to a nun who revealed that he has a history as a sexual abuser. This is a lie, but it disarms him, and his reaction is enough to convince Sister James that he is, in fact, a pedophile (though she still has no concrete evidence). When she tells Sister James about this interaction, James is beside herself. “I can’t believe you lied,” she says. However, Sister Aloysius believes that sometimes a person must make small moral sacrifices to address greater wrongs. “If I could, Sister James, I would certainly choose to live in innocence,” she says during another conversation. “But innocence can only be wisdom in a world without evil. Situations arise and we are confronted with wrongdoing and the need to act.” It is this “need to act” that drives Sister Aloysius forward. Though it’s never clear if Sister Aloysius is actually in the right, the possibility that she *could* be right about Father Flynn demonstrates that acting morally may mean prioritizing large-scale ethical convictions over smaller concerns about what’s right and what’s wrong.



POWER AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The characters in John Patrick Shanley’s *Doubt* exist in a strict and hierarchal chain of command.

This, Shanley implies, makes it difficult for moral people like Sister Aloysius to question authority, even when it’s glaringly obvious that her superiors are protecting each other from being held accountable for their actions. More specifically, Shanley suggests that the structures of power in the Catholic Church enable people like Father Flynn to take advantage of their status without having to worry about repercussions. As Sister Aloysius tries to punish Father Flynn because she suspects that he has sexually abused young Donald Muller, she discovers that she has very few resources available to her, since people like Monsignor Benedict are quick to downplay such situations. Worse, Father Flynn is aware that his superiors will be hesitant to punish him, and he lords this over Sister Aloysius, constantly reminding her of her lack of power. After Sister Aloysius confronts Flynn about her suspicions, he is merely reassigned to another parish, where he will continue to work with children—a disturbing outcome if he is indeed guilty of child abuse. By outlining this potential tragedy, then, Shanley shows audiences the dangerous ways in which immoral people can hide behind various power structures in order to protect themselves from punishment.

It’s difficult for Sister Aloysius to put a stop to Father Flynn’s alleged behavior. This is because she doesn’t have powerful allies whom she can fully trust. When Sister James first tells her that Donald Muller behaved strangely after a one-on-one meeting with Father Flynn, Sister Aloysius laments her lack of resources in pursuing the truth. She explains that she once

encountered a similar situation at a different parish, but she was able to “rely on” the Monsignor who was in charge. Now, though, she doesn’t have a trustworthy superior to whom she can bring this news. “Here, there’s no man I can go to, and men run everything,” she says. “We are going to have to stop [Flynn] ourselves.” It’s worth noting that Sister Aloysius is aware of the ways in which gender dynamics factor into this situation. After all, she is a woman in the early 1960s who works in an environment in which men hold all of the power. As if this doesn’t already pose a challenge to her general authority, she knows that Monsignor Benedict (who is in charge of the parish) won’t use his influence against Father Flynn. “The man’s guileless!” she says. “He would just ask Father Flynn!” This, Sister Aloysius comprehends, would be a very ineffective way of addressing the possibility of Donald Muller’s abuse, since Father Flynn would obviously deny the accusations. “If I tell the monsignor and he is satisfied with Father Flynn’s rebuttal, the matter is suppressed,” she comments. When she says this, the audience sees the chain of command that rules the parish, and it becomes clear that Monsignor Benedict—who has the most power—is the kind of person who would quickly turn his back on serious matters regarding his subordinates. Because of this, Sister Aloysius feels as if she can’t make use of the institution’s resources, leaving her to pursue the matter on her own.

Operating outside the parish’s standard channels of communication, Sister Aloysius invites Father Flynn into her office on the pretense of discussing another matter. She then brings up what she really wants to talk about: the possibility that Flynn has sexually abused Donald Muller. Father Flynn is beside himself, enraged that Sister Aloysius would not only dare to accuse him of something so ghastly, but also dare to address the matter herself. This, he suggests, is unacceptable, since Aloysius ought to defer to her superiors. As Sister Aloysius tries to get Flynn to admit what he’s done, he reminds her that he’s in a position of power, saying, “If I had judged my conversation with Donald Muller to be of concern to you, Sister, I would have sat you down and talked to you about it. But I did not judge it to be of concern to you.” This is an underhanded way of suggesting that Sister Aloysius has overstepped certain boundaries. If this appeal to his own authority isn’t already evident, Flynn makes it even more apparent when he adds, “I’m not answerable to you.” In turn, Shanley encourages the audience to reflect on how difficult it is for a subordinate to get a person in a position of power to confess to wrongdoing—a notion that underlines how important it is for institutions to make sure everyone is held accountable for their actions, regardless of their influence.

In Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn’s final confrontation, she tells him that she has called his former parish and spoken to a nun, who told her that he sexually abused a child there, too. Unaware that this is a lie, Father Flynn reacts harshly, saying, “That’s not the proper route for you to have taken, Sister!”

Nonetheless, Sister Aloysius remains steadfast, telling Father Flynn that she plans to visit all his former parishes until she finds a parent who's willing to speak openly about his history as a sexual abuser. "You have no right to act on your own!" Flynn yells. "You are a member of a religious order. You have taken vows, obedience being one! You answer to us!" By referencing the church's chain of command, Flynn tries to frame Sister Aloysius as the immoral one, suggesting that she has violated her vows. In doing so, he relies on the church's chain of command to make it harder for her to challenge him.

All this demonstrates the fact that certain power structures make it easier for potentially immoral and dangerous people to protect themselves. Sister Aloysius believes that she has succeeded in proving that Flynn is guilty, reasoning that he wouldn't have reacted angrily if her accusations were false, though she doesn't have definitive evidence. Guilty or not, he avoids punishment or damage to his reputation by making an appeal to an even *higher* ring of power, ultimately calling a bishop and convincing him to transfer him to another parish. In this way, Shanley highlights the unfortunate fact that certain institutions consolidate power in ways that can allow people to avoid facing consequences for their wrongs.



DOUBT AND UNCERTAINTY

As made evident by the title, *Doubt* is a play that examines how people deal with feelings of uncertainty and skepticism. Considering that the

play takes place in a Catholic parish, the most obvious manifestation of doubt is the kind that arises when people question their religious faith. In his sermon during the first scene, Father Flynn implies that people ought to trust their beliefs even when there's no evidence to support them. Interestingly enough, though, the play itself isn't solely about this kind of religious doubt, despite the fact that it opens with a sermon that focuses on spiritual uncertainty. Rather, Shanley is interested in applying Father Flynn's conception of religious doubt to other forms of skepticism, such as Sister Aloysius's suspicion that Flynn is sexually abusing Donald Muller. Whereas Flynn encourages his listeners during his sermon to unquestioningly follow what they've already decided to believe, Sister Aloysius refuses to complacently assume that her superiors are morally good just because they're affiliated with the Catholic Church, an institution to which she has devoted her entire life. Consequently, she doesn't back down when others urge her to drop the matter, since she's unwilling to let Flynn sully the Catholic faith. In turn, the audience sees that what might seem like doubt is actually a form of commitment to the church, as Sister Aloysius proves that truly believing in something means having the courage to interrogate its flaws.

Doubt opens with a sermon by Father Flynn, in which he asks, "What do you do when you're not sure?" He goes on to tell a short parable about a large boat that sinks in the middle of the

ocean. Only one sailor survives, Father Flynn says, and he fashions himself a raft before looking "to the Heavens" so that he can "read the stars." A nautical man, he's able to navigate his way by referencing the stars, so he sets off in the direction of his home. However, clouds soon make it impossible for him to continue navigating. "He thought he was on course but there was no way to be certain," Father Flynn preaches. After several days, the sailor begins to worry. "Had he set his course right? Was he still going on towards his home? Or was he horribly lost and doomed to a terrible death? No way to know," Flynn says. He then adds that the sailor caught a glimpse of "the Truth" when he first looked at the stars, and now he has to "hold on to it without further reassurance." This, Father Flynn insists, is similar to the "crisis of faith" that many Catholics have, as they learn about God and heaven but rarely encounter any reassurance that such things exist. In keeping with this idea, he implies that people ought to stick to their beliefs, blindly following what they think is true without stopping to second-guess themselves. In other words, he believes that the only way to respond to doubt is by ignoring it.

Although Father Flynn's sermon about how to respond to doubt is specifically about religious faith, the idea behind it applies to other forms of uncertainty as well. For instance, Sister James's initial suspicion that Father Flynn has an inappropriate relationship with Donald Muller gives her bad dreams and causes her to lose her "peace of mind," since the idea that a well-respected priest would rape an altar boy thoroughly rattles her sense that the Catholic church is unfailingly good. For this reason, she's hesitant to even acknowledge what she clearly knows is going on.

When Sister James tells Sister Aloysius that Donald seemed strange when he returned to class after spending time alone with Father Flynn, she tries to convince herself that she doesn't actually think anything bad happened. "[Father Flynn has] taken an interest," she says. "I thought I should tell you." Hearing this, Sister Aloysius says, "So it's happened." "What?!" Sister James replies. "I'm not telling you that! I'm not even certain what you mean." In this exchange, the audience sees that Sister James is simultaneously acting on her suspicion *and* actively denying her own credibility. This is because she wants to blindly believe that someone like Father Flynn would never do anything wrong. Like the sailor lost at sea, she wants badly to trust that what she has always believed is still the case.

Unlike Sister James, Sister Aloysius is willing to face the possibility that Father Flynn is an immoral man. Rather than unquestioningly thinking that her superiors are morally irreproachable because of their prominence in the Catholic church, she recognizes that even people who seem pious and good might not actually embody these qualities. After Sister Aloysius believes she's proven that Father Flynn truly is a pedophile (though she doesn't have concrete evidence), Sister James is thoroughly unnerved by this possibility. "I can't sleep

at night anymore. Everything seems uncertain to me,” she says. In response, Sister Aloysius highlights the importance of examining one’s own beliefs without bias, saying, “Maybe we’re not supposed to sleep so well.”

Simply put, Sister Aloysius understands that a belief means nothing if a person refuses to question it. The only way for Sister Aloysius to hold strong convictions about something is for her to challenge and address the things that stand in the way of her ability to believe in it wholeheartedly. Because she has devoted her entire life and existence to Catholicism, she refuses to stand idly by while she believes Father Flynn is destroying the morality of the church. By acting on her doubt, then, she actually demonstrates her unflinching devotion to the Catholic Church, ultimately suggesting that certain kinds of uncertainty can actively contribute to a person’s systems of belief.



TRADITION VS. CHANGE

In *Doubt*, John Patrick Shanley surveys the Catholic Church’s commitment to tradition, showcasing the institution’s internal struggles regarding change.

Sister Aloysius, for her part, is committed to preserving an older, more traditional style of running a Catholic school, believing that teachers ought to be strict, fearsome, and authoritative. Sister James, on the other hand, wants her students to be comfortable when they’re in her class. Similarly, she likes the idea of breaking with tradition in certain contexts, which is why both she and Father Flynn get excited about the idea of having their students sing secular songs at the yearly Christmas pageant. Sister Aloysius judges them for wanting to invite change into the church, but Father Flynn insists that the church needs to find ways to “take on a more familiar face.” Later on, the play casts doubt on this sentiment by insinuating that Flynn might be using it to justify an inappropriately close relationship with Donald Muller. He claims that people like Sister Aloysius are “cruel” because they refuse to embrace their students, which could be interpreted as him manipulating an otherwise positive message about change and open-mindedness in order to exploit young children (though the play never reveals whether he’s actually guilty of child abuse). And though Shanley doesn’t condemn progress in general, he does suggest that periods of growth can be quite volatile, especially when an institution like the Catholic Church is so set in its ways and, thus, ill-equipped to recognize which kinds of change are positive and which kinds are harmful.

As early as the play’s second scene, Sister Aloysius outlines her belief in sticking to the old ways as a school principal. In a conversation with Sister James, she stresses just how resistant she is to change, saying that she thinks students should still have to write with fountain pens. “I’m sorry I allowed even cartridge pens into the school,” she says. “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 consequences tomorrow.” When she says this, she suggests that adopting new practices in the name of efficiency and modernization will only lead to trouble, thereby framing change itself as something dangerous.

Unlike Sister Aloysius, though, Sister James is a young woman who doesn’t mind the idea of inviting a bit of change into the Catholic Church’s school system. As a result, she likes Father Flynn’s idea that the students should sing a secular song at that year’s Christmas pageant. When James suggests that the children could sing “Frosty the Snowman,” Sister Aloysius makes her disapproval clear, saying, “‘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.” Responding to this strong condemnation, Flynn suggests that Sister Aloysius is “intoleran[t].” He even argues that the Catholic Church itself has already embraced the idea of change, regardless of what Sister Aloysius thinks. “I think a message of the Second Ecumenical Council was that the Church needs to take on a more familiar face,” he says. “Reflect the community. We should sing a song from the radio now and then. Take the kids out for ice cream.” When he says this, he challenges Sister Aloysius’s implication that change is something that will lead to “heresy.” He even implies that making the Church more “familiar” to outsiders will help ensure that Catholicism reaches as many people as possible.

Father Flynn’s belief that the Catholic Church should make itself more “familiar” to the public also brings itself to bear on the way he behaves as an educator. In a private conversation with Sister James (in which he convinces her that he’s not a pedophile), he manipulatively turns the young woman against Sister Aloysius. To do this, he claims that his close relationship with Donald Muller is merely an example of a contemporary and supportive bond between a teacher and a pupil—which may or may not be true. Wanting to vilify Sister Aloysius, he points to her strict and traditional ways, framing them as inherently unkind. “There are people who go after your humanity, Sister James, who tell you the light in your heart is a weakness,” he says. “That your soft feelings betray you. I don’t believe that. 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.” Going on, he reminds her that Jesus Christ’s primary “message” was one of love. “Not suspicion, disapproval and judgment,” he says. “Love of people. Have you found Sister Aloysius a positive inspiration?” In response, Sister James says that Sister Aloysius has been discouraging and harsh. While this might be the case, there’s no denying that Father Flynn has used his disdain for Sister Aloysius’s traditional ways to villainize her in Sister James’s eyes.

By associating Aloysius’s old-fashioned approach (which Sister

James clearly dislikes) with “suspicion,” Flynn subtly urges James to side with him regarding the issue of Donald Muller. Simply put, he uses his beliefs about change and kindness to manipulate another person, effectively blinding Sister James to his wrongdoings by telling her what she wants to hear about change. Winning her over in this way would make it easier for him to go on abusing an innocent child, if Sister Aloysius's suspicious are correct (though, again, his guilt is never definitively proven or disproven).

In this way, Shanley shows the audience that even the most positive messages about transformation and progress can be weaponized and used for evil. And though this might seem like a critique of change in general, it's mostly a simple warning, one that urges people to recognize that moments of transition and upheaval are often fraught and complicated.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BALLPOINT PENS

Because Sister Aloysius frowns upon the use of ballpoint pens over fountain pens, the writing instruments themselves come to embody her belief that changing certain traditional practices is ill-advised and “complacent.” Ballpoint pens are significantly easier to write with than fountain pens, which is why Aloysius sees them as utensils for lazy people. “Always the easy way out these days,” she says when she explains to Sister James that all students should be using fountain pens to learn cursive. “What does that teach? Every easy choice today will have its consequences tomorrow.” As she insists that ballpoint pens cause children to press down too hard and consequently rip the paper, the pens themselves come to represent her unwillingness to embrace change or progress, which she thinks will have negative “consequences” in the future.



SUGAR

The sugar that Father Flynn puts in his tea during his first meeting with Sister Aloysius is indicative of his uncompromising quest for satisfaction, which Aloysius finds appalling. Holding out his tea, Flynn asks for three lumps of sugar, an excessive amount that astounds Aloysius, who doesn't use any sugar at all in her own tea. “Sweet tooth,” he explains, inadvertently framing himself as the kind of person who's quick to give in to his desires. This is especially significant because Sister Aloysius is convinced that he's child molester, and the play causes the audience to doubt Father Flynn's character. In the same way that Father Flynn doesn't bother to stop himself

from eating too much sugar even though it's obviously not good for him, Sister Aloysius believes that he doesn't stop himself from acting on his inappropriate feelings for young boys. As a result, the sugar he asks for in Sister Aloysius's office comes to stand not only for his insatiability, but also his shamelessness about what he wants.




QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Theatre Communications Group edition of *Doubt: A Parable* published in 2005.

Scene 1 Quotes

☞ Had he set his course right? Was he still going on towards his home? Or was he horribly lost and doomed to a terrible death? No way to know. The message of the constellations—had he imagined it because of his desperate circumstance? Or had he seen Truth once, and now had to hold on to it without further reassurance? That was his dilemma on a voyage without apparent end. There are those of you in church today who know exactly the crisis of faith I describe. 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. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Related Characters: Father Flynn (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Father Flynn addresses these words to his congregation during a sermon about how best to deal with doubt and uncertainty. In the sermon, he tells a parable about a sailor who is lost at sea. The sailor is the only person who survived the sinking of a large cargo ship in the middle of the ocean, and now he's left to find his way home. Thankfully, he knows how to navigate by the stars, so he calculates the correct direction and sets his course. However, heavy clouds soon obscure the skies from him, causing him to wonder if he is still “going on towards his home.” There is, Father Flynn says, “no way to know” the correct direction. In this moment of uncertainty, the sailor begins to question whether or not he “imagined” the way home “because of his desperate circumstance.” Rather than trusting his initial sense of certainty, he suddenly worries that he's going the wrong way. Father Flynn insists that people who have “crisis[es] of faith” experience a similar feeling, yearning desperately for reassurance that their beliefs are sound. He insinuates that

people have to simply accept that they can't know anything for sure. The best way for people respond to doubt, he implies, is to acknowledge it and remain committed to their original convictions. Given that Sister Aloysius later finds herself having to question the morality of the Catholic Church, this sentiment is worth keeping in mind as the play progresses, since she refuses to blindly trust that everything will be all right, instead interrogating the very institution she's supposed to unhesitatingly believe in.

Scene 2 Quotes

☞☞ SISTER ALOYSIUS: Usually more children are sent down to me.

SISTER JAMES: I try to take care of things myself.

SISTER ALOYSIUS: That can be an error. 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.

Related Characters: Sister Aloysius, Sister James (speaker), Monsignor Benedict

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 8


Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation, Sister Aloysius talks to Sister James about her pedagogical methods. In particular, she criticizes Sister James's tendency to "take care of things" herself. Instead of addressing disciplinary matters on her own, Sister Aloysius wants Sister James to "make use" of the "chain of discipline" that exists at St. Nicholas School. This advice underlines Aloysius's commitment to the traditional way of running a Catholic school, but it also demonstrates her respect for power, order, and control. She believes that everyone at St. Nicholas School should respect the institution's pre-existing hierarchy of power. The fact that she spells this out so clearly in this scene helps the audience understand later in the play just how much she cares about protecting her students, since she blatantly defies this "chain of discipline" in order to protect Donald Muller from Father Flynn, whom she believes is an abuser. In turn, it's obvious that she sees it as her moral duty to do whatever she can to protect her students, even if this means going against a system she otherwise respects and champions.

☞☞ 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.

Related Characters: Sister Aloysius (speaker), Sister James, William London, Father Flynn, Donald Muller

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Sister Aloysius says this to Sister James during their conversation about how Sister James should conduct her class. She has just informed Sister James that William London—one of James's students—had a ballpoint pen with him when she last saw him. Sister Aloysius reveals her fondness for old, traditional practices when she says that every student "should only be learning script with true fountain pens," a practice that would be a bit dated even in 1964, when *Doubt* takes place. Nevertheless, she believes that certain forms of change and progress do nothing but offer "the easy way out." This idea accords with her general belief that people ought to remain diligent and alert, a mindset she wants Sister James to adopt. "Every easy choice today will have its consequence tomorrow," she says, and though she's still merely talking about the use of ballpoint pens, her general message can be applied to her entire worldview. After all, she later urges Sister James to hold on to her suspicions about Father Flynn, suggesting that simply believing that he hasn't raped Donald Muller would be the "easy" choice. What's more, this "easy" choice would indeed "have its consequences," since if Sister Aloysius's suspicions are correct, taking Flynn's word about his relationship with Donald Muller would enable him to continue his abusive ways. In this regard, what she says about ballpoint pens in this moment offers insight into why she's so hesitant to believe Father Flynn later in the play.

☞☞ SISTER ALOYSIUS: [...] 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.

[...]

The heart is warm, but your wits must be cold. Liars should be frightened to lie to you. They should be uncomfortable in your presence.

[...]

SISTER JAMES: But I want my students to feel they can talk to me.

SISTER ALOYSIUS: They're children. They can talk to each other. It's more important they have a fierce moral guardian. You stand at the door, Sister. You are the gate-keeper. If you are vigilant, they will not need to be.

Related Characters: Sister Aloysius, Sister James (speaker), Father Flynn

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sister Aloysius spells out why she thinks the nuns should be so strict with their students. When she criticizes Sister James's kind and warm approach to teaching, Sister James is taken aback and says she was under the impression that Sister Aloysius was "satisfied" with her. In response, Sister Aloysius says that "good teachers are never content," insisting that it would be "self-indulgent" of Sister James to be "innocent." In keeping with this, she wants Sister James to be a "vigilant" watcher, someone whose "wits" are "cold." She champions this kind of pedagogical approach because she thinks that children need "fierce moral guardian[s]," not adults who behave like friends. This is an especially important point, since Father Flynn later tells Sister James that he treats his students with "compassion," using this to justify why Sister Aloysius has accused him of having an inappropriate relationship with Donald Muller. In this moment, Sister Aloysius tries to train Sister James to be a "gate-keeper," someone who sees it as her responsibility to protect children from people she has doubts about, like Father Flynn.

☞☞ Look at you. You'd trade anything for a warm look. I'm telling you here and now, I want to see the starch in your character cultivated. If you are looking for reassurance, you can be fooled. If you forget yourself and study others, you will not be fooled.

Related Characters: Sister Aloysius (speaker), Sister James, Father Flynn, Donald Muller

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Sister Aloysius says this to Sister James after telling her that she needs to embody a stricter, more fearsome presence when dealing with her students. Sister James eagerly tells her that she will do her best to adopt a cold and unforgiving attitude, but Sister Aloysius chastises her for trying so hard to please her. "Look at you," she says. "You'd trade anything for a warm look." Although Sister James is just trying to please Sister Aloysius, Aloysius scolds her for caring too much about what other people think. This is because she believes that a person who's in desperate need of "reassurance" can be easily "fooled." This bit of advice, it turns out, is quite shrewd, since Sister James later allows herself to believe in Father Flynn's innocence simply because he talks to her and tells her what she wants to hear—namely, that she should be kind or "compassionate" with her students. If Sister James weren't so willing to "trade anything for a warm look," it's possible that she would instead believe in Sister Aloysius's doubts about Father Flynn.

Scene 4 Quotes



☞☞ SISTER JAMES: 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. Sister Aloysius. 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.

SISTER ALOYSIUS: You may not have it. It is not your place to be complacent. That's for the children. That's what we give them.

SISTER JAMES: I think I'm starting to understand you a little. But it's so unsettling to look at things and people with suspicion. It feels as if I'm less close God.

SISTER ALOYSIUS: When you take a step to address wrongdoing, you are taking a step away from God, but in His service. Dealing with such matters is hard and thankless work.

Related Characters: Sister James, Sister Aloysius (speaker), Donald Muller, Father Flynn

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place after Sister James reveals that Donald Muller was behaving strangely in class after spending time alone with Father Flynn in the rectory. Although she's the one to relay this concerning information to Sister Aloysius, James is hesitant to jump to conclusions about what might have happened in the rectory. Consequently, Aloysius urges her not to feign ignorance. In response, Sister James admits that she has been making a concerted effort to "become more cold in [her] thinking." She has done this, she explains, because Aloysius wants her to embody a strict and discerning presence in the classroom. However, she has found this mindset quite unsettling, since remaining in a constant state of suspicion makes her feel like she has lost her "peace of mind." Despite her distress, though, she receives no sympathy from Sister Aloysius, who believes that having "peace of mind" is often the byproduct of "complacent" thinking. "That's for the children. That's what we give them," she says, underlining the fact that the nuns have to be suspicious *for* the children, since the students rely on them for protection.

Sister James understands what Sister Aloysius means, but she still struggles with the idea of becoming "cold," since doing so makes her feel "less close to God." Once again, though, Sister Aloysius disregards this misgiving, this time suggesting that "address[ing] wrongdoing" sometimes means moving away from God. However, that doesn't mean that Sister James will be *defying* God by adopting a suspicious mindset. Rather, Sister Aloysius believes that pursuing "wrongdoing" is actually a way of working under God's "service," even if doing so makes a person feel estranged from God. This, it seems, is why "dealing with such matters is hard and thankless work," since it's so difficult and unrewarding.

☞ SISTER ALOYSIUS: Eight years ago at St. Boniface we had a priest who had to be stopped. But I had Monsignor Scully then . . . whom I could rely on. Here, there's no man I can go to, and men run everything. We are going to have to stop him ourselves.

SISTER JAMES: Can't you just...report your suspicions?

SISTER ALOYSIUS: To Monsignor Benedict? The man's guileless! He would just ask Father Flynn!

SISTER JAMES: Well, would that be such a bad idea?

SISTER ALOYSIUS: And he would believe whatever Father Flynn told him. He would think the matter settled.

Related Characters: Sister Aloysius, Sister James (speaker), Donald Muller, Father Flynn, Monsignor Benedict

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation, Sister Aloysius explains why she can't make use of the Catholic Church's standard "chain of discipline." Although she has dealt with situations similar to the one she now faces regarding Father Flynn, she has always had the support of an attentive monsignor. Now, though, she can't trust Monsignor Benedict to actually look into whether or not it's true that Father Flynn has molested Donald Muller. This implies that Monsignor Benedict will protect Father Flynn no matter what, indicating that the power structures of St. Nicholas Church and School enable immoral people to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. Insisting that Monsignor Benedict is naïve (or "guileless"), Sister Aloysius says that he would simply ask Father Flynn about his relationship with Donald Muller. "And he would believe whatever Father Flynn told him," she says. Needless to say, this would take the matter out of Aloysius's hands and turn it into nothing but a dead-end, enabling Flynn to continue taking advantage of boys like Donald if he is indeed an abuser. In this scene, the audience sees how utterly powerless Sister Aloysius is, despite the fact that she's the school's principal. Without any dependable resources to support her in her attempt to investigate the truth, she's forced to look into the matter on her own, thereby defying the institution's traditional rules and customs, which she otherwise values so deeply.

Importantly, this passage also reveals that Sister Aloysius has had a previous experience with a priest who abused his power. It's implied that the priest at St. Boniface may have had an inappropriate relationship with a child, which is, of course, what Sister Aloysius suspects Father Flynn of doing. This detail thus introduces another layer of doubt to the

play: while it's possible that Father Flynn is a child molester, it's also possible that Sister Aloysius is simply biased against Flynn because of what she experienced eight years ago.

Scene 5 Quotes

●● FLYNN: [...] 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.

Related Characters: Father Flynn, Sister Aloysius (speaker), Sister James, Donald Muller

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

When Sister Aloysius meets with Father Flynn in her office, she pretends that she wants to discuss the Christmas pageant. In truth, she wants to ask him about his relationship with Donald Muller, but he doesn't know this, which is why he begins by suggesting that the choir should sing a secular song at the pageant. Demonstrating just how fundamentally different their opinions are when it comes to tradition and change, Sister Aloysius immediately takes issue with the idea of presenting secular music at a religious event. In response, Flynn references the Second Vatican Council, a meeting that took place in the sixties and determined that the Church should become more accessible to the masses. *Doubt* is set at a time when these changes were just being disseminated within the Church, and they were controversial—while Flynn is appealing here to ideas being spread by the Pope himself, Aloysius's rejection of these ideas suggests that her strict, conservative outlook comes not from blind obedience to

the Church, but rather from a principled stance on the approach she believes to be best.

It's worth noting that Flynn wants to "take the boys on a camping trip." This suggestion may reflect an innocent desire to bond with the students, but it disturbs Sister Aloysius because she believes Flynn is having an inappropriate relationship with Donald Muller. As if to remind him that there are certain things people in his position shouldn't do with children, Sister Aloysius says that priests and nuns aren't part of the children's families, railing against Father Flynn's sense of warm familiarity. This clash over religious values sets the tone for their ensuing conversation about Donald Muller, emphasizing just how diametrically opposed Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius are even before Aloysius accuses him of child molestation.

●● FLYNN: Well. I feel a little uncomfortable.

SISTER ALOYSIUS: Why?

FLYNN: Why do you think? Something about your tone.

SISTER ALOYSIUS: I would prefer a discussion of fact rather than tone.

FLYNN: Well. If I had judged my conversation with Donald Muller to be of concern to you, Sister, I would have sat you down and talked to you about it. But I did not judge it to be of concern to you.

Related Characters: Father Flynn, Sister Aloysius (speaker), Sister James, Donald Muller

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis



Once Sister Aloysius reveals to Father Flynn that she called him to her office to talk about his relationship with Donald Muller, he tries to dodge her underhanded accusation that he has sexually abused the boy. She doesn't immediately tell him that she thinks he has molested Donald, which is why he begins his defense by simply saying that he feels "a little uncomfortable" about her "tone." Not wanting to let him off the hook, Sister Aloysius says that she would "prefer a discussion of fact rather than tone," a statement intended to force him into speaking more specifically about what happened between him and Donald. This is an important rhetorical move, as it allows Sister Aloysius to insinuate that Father Flynn shouldn't be "uncomfortable" if he's innocent. However, he sidesteps this implication by subtly reminding

her that he is her superior. To do this, he points out that he would have told her about what happened between him and Donald if he thought it was of “concern” to her. “But I did not judge it to be of concern to you,” he says, emphasizing the fact that he can choose to keep things from Sister Aloysius if he wants. In turn, the audience sees that Sister Aloysius is in an especially difficult position, since she has no resources to help her get Father Flynn to tell the truth. Without somebody like a Monsignor to assist Aloysius, Father Flynn is effectively free to say and do whatever he wants, since she has no authority over him.

☛ SISTER ALOYSIUS: No. If the boy drank altar wine, he cannot continue as an altar boy.

FLYNN: Of course you’re right. I’m just not the disciplinarian you are, Sister. And he is the only Negro in the school. That did affect my thinking on the matter. It will be commented on that he’s no longer serving at Mass. It’s a public thing. A certain ignorant element in the parish will be confirmed in their beliefs.

Related Characters: Sister Aloysius, Father Flynn (speaker), Sister James, Donald Muller

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

After Sister Aloysius tells Father Flynn that Sister James smelled alcohol on Donald’s breath, the priest claims that Donald was caught drinking altar wine on his own. According to this story, Flynn decided not to say anything because he didn’t want Donald—the school’s first and only black student—to be kicked out of the altar boys. Now, though, he has no choice but to remove Donald, since word has gotten out about the wine. By making these claims, Father Flynn tries to make Sister Aloysius feel guilty for investigating what happened between him and Donald Muller. “A certain ignorant element in the parish will be confirmed in their beliefs,” he says, commenting on the fact that racist people in the parish will read into Donald’s removal from the altar boys. By saying this, he implies that Sister Aloysius is to blame for any racism that is directed toward Donald upon his removal from the altar boys. Meanwhile, Flynn presents himself as a kind and empathetic man, the type of person who takes pity on students like Donald Muller and tries to give them second chances. His strategy in communicating with Sister Aloysius creates more doubt, as it’s impossible to tell whether he’s telling the truth or if he’s manipulatively using his power and authority

to his own benefit, trying to make Sister Aloysius feel so guilty and inferior that she stops trying to discover the truth.

Scene 6 Quotes

☛ So she went home, took the pillow off her bed, a knife from the drawer, went up the fire escape to the roof, and stabbed the pillow. Then she went back to the old priest as instructed. “Did you gut the pillow with the knife?” he says. “Yes, Father.” “And what was the result?” “Feathers,” she said. “Feathers?” he repeated. “Feathers everywhere. Father!” “Now I want you to go back and gather up every last feather that flew out on the wind!” “Well,” she says, “it can’t be done. I don’t know where they went. The wind took them all over.” “And that,” said [the Father], “is *gossip!*”

Related Characters: Father Flynn (speaker), Sister Aloysius, Donald Muller

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Father Flynn says this while delivering a sermon about the nature of gossip. He tells a parable about a woman who unfairly speaks disparaging words about a man she hardly knows. When she goes to confession and admits that she was wrong to say such things, the priest tells her to go home and cut a pillow open on her rooftop. Confused, she follows his instructions and then returns, at which point he suggests that taking back gossip would be like trying to collect all of the feathers that flew out of the pillow on the woman’s rooftop. Using this parable, Father Flynn warns his listeners against the powers of gossip, implying that a person can do irrevocable harm by speaking negatively—and unfoundedly—about others. That Flynn delivers this sermon shortly after Sister Aloysius accuses him of molesting Donald Muller is significant, since it demonstrates just how willing he is to use his powerful platform to fight her. Of course, nobody other than Sister James knows what Sister Aloysius has said about Flynn, but this is exactly why he makes up this story about the feathers—he’s worried that she will tell others about her suspicions, thereby ruining his reputation. Responding to this fear, then, he uses his power as a priest not only to discourage Aloysius from speaking badly about him, but also to urge his congregants not to put stock in anything that might sound like gossip. In doing so, he protects his reputation even before Sister Aloysius attacks it in a public manner.

Scene 7 Quotes

●● 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. I don't believe that. 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.

SISTER JAMES: Of course not, but...

FLYNN: Have you forgotten that was the message of the Savior to us all. Love. Not suspicion, disapproval and judgment. Love of people.

Related Characters: Father Flynn, Sister James (speaker), Sister Aloysius, Donald Muller

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Father Flynn tries to convince Sister James that she shouldn't adopt the "cold" and strict worldview that Sister Aloysius has foisted upon her. "There are people who go after your humanity, Sister James," he says, subtly implying that everything Sister Aloysius stands for is at odds with the kind of person Sister James has always tried to be. By telling her that Aloysius's strictness is "an old tactic" that people use to "kill kindness in the name of virtue," Father Flynn tells Sister James exactly what she wants to hear—namely, that it's perfectly acceptable to be warm and welcoming. Throughout the play, she has struggled to embody the harsh disciplinarian spirit that Sister Aloysius thinks she needs to cultivate. Consequently, Flynn's words in this moment resonate with her quite significantly. It's worth remembering in this scene that Sister Aloysius has already warned Sister James about the dangers of seeking approval and acceptance from others. Although Aloysius told her that she will be easier to "fool" if she allows people to tell her what she wants to hear, she lets Father Flynn do just that as they sit in the garden together, ultimately giving him an opportunity to convince her that he's innocent, whether he truly is or not.

Scene 8 Quotes

●● 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.

Related Characters: Mrs. Muller (speaker), Sister Aloysius, Donald Muller, Father Flynn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 47



Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Muller says this to Sister Aloysius when Sister Aloysius informs her that there might be something inappropriate going on between Father Flynn and Donald. Rather than worrying, Mrs. Muller chooses to ignore the situation. This reaction unsettles Sister Aloysius, who believes that adults have a responsibility to protect children and therefore can't simply turn away from ugly matters. However, Mrs. Muller insists that finding out more about this situation will only invite more trouble for Donald. "You got some kind a righteous cause going with this priest and now you want to drag my boy into it," she says. What's most interesting about this sentiment is that—although it's startling and upsetting that Mrs. Muller is willing to ignore this situation—she's somewhat correct when she says that Sister Aloysius has a "righteous cause." This is a complex dynamic in *Doubt*, since Sister Aloysius is portrayed as a staunchly moral person who genuinely cares about students like Donald. However, Shanley is also interested in exploring the possibility that Aloysius is out of line, and Shanley wants the audience to ask themselves whether or not Sister Aloysius is overreacting. After all, it's true that Donald "doesn't need additional difficulties," though it's not true that forcing him to endure sexual abuse (if this is indeed what's happening) is an acceptable path forward. All the same, Shanley invites the audience to experience their own sense of doubt and uncertainty by throwing Sister Aloysius's intentions into question in this scene.

●● SISTER ALOYSIUS: But I have my certainty, and armed with that, I will go to your last parish, and the one before that if necessary. I will find a parent, Father Flynn! Trust me I will. A parent who probably doesn't know that you are *still working with children!* And once I do that, you will be exposed. You may even be attacked, metaphorically or otherwise.

FLYNN: You have no right to act on your own! You are a member of a religious order. You have taken vows, obedience being one! You answer to us! You have no right to step outside the Church!

Related Characters: Sister Aloysius, Father Flynn (speaker), Donald Muller, Mrs. Muller

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

After Mrs. Muller leaves Sister Aloysius's office, Father Flynn enters and yells at Sister Aloysius for talking to her behind his back. This sets off an argument, in which Sister Aloysius informs him that she will go to his previous parishes and find people willing to speak out against him. Father Flynn sees this as her "step[ping] outside the Church," an idea that recalls the institution's clear-cut chain of command, which Sister Aloysius has blatantly circumnavigated. "You have no right to act on your own!" Father Flynn yells, trying to frame her as a renegade. Above all, this is a power move, one that reminds her that she is his subordinate. "You answer to us!" he adds. It's worth noting that he uses the word "us" instead of "me," thereby suggesting that all of the authorities in the Church will automatically align with him, not with her. This, of course, is exactly why she has "step[ped] outside the Church," as she perfectly understands that the institution's most powerful figures will protect one another and help people avoid facing consequences for their misbehavior. Once again, then, the audience sees how disempowered Sister Aloysius has become, despite the fact that she is principal of St. Nicholas School. What's more, Father Flynn's reaction to Sister Aloysius's threat invites the audience to doubt his innocence, since it could imply that he's scared of what people from his previous parishes might tell Aloysius.

Scene 9 Quotes

☝☝ SISTER JAMES: I wish I could be like you.

SISTER ALOYSIUS: Why?

SISTER JAMES: Because I can't sleep at night anymore. Everything seems uncertain to me.

SISTER ALOYSIUS: Maybe we're not supposed to sleep so well.

Related Characters: Sister James, Sister Aloysius (speaker), Father Flynn, Donald Muller

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place between Sister Aloysius and Sister James shortly after Father Flynn is given a position as a pastor of another parish. Sister Aloysius has just told Sister James that, though she failed to prove to the greater public that Father Flynn is a sexual abuser, she proved it to herself. In response, Sister James says, "I wish I could be like you," going on to indicate that she admires Sister Aloysius's certainty and convictions. She, on the other hand, finds it difficult to sleep now that "everything seems uncertain." Because Sister James is a kindhearted person who wants to think the best of everybody (and until this point probably has), she is thoroughly disoriented by the idea that a priest could do such a terrible thing. Sister Aloysius, on the other hand, is unsurprised by what has happened. After all, she thinks that living with "peace of mind" is a form of complacency, which is why she says, "Maybe we're not supposed to sleep so well." By making this suggestion, she implies once again that it is up to the nuns to vigilantly interrogate the world around them, searching for moral shortcomings wherever they can, since this is the only way to protect children like Donald Muller from harm.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SCENE 1

Father Flynn addresses St. Nicholas Church, delivering a sermon about doubt. “What do you do when you’re not sure?” he begins, going on to point out that many people experience this feeling. He references the assassination of President John F. Kennedy that took place one year ago, pointing out that everyone felt a sense of “profound disorientation” and “despair” in the aftermath of the event. This, he argues, brought people together. “It was a time of people sitting together, bound together by a common feeling of hopelessness,” he says. “But think of that! Your *bond* with your fellow beings was your *despair*.”

Continuing his sermon, Father Flynn tells a story about a cargo ship that sinks in the middle of the ocean. Everyone onboard dies except one sailor, who builds a makeshift raft for himself and looks to the sky, navigating his way home using the stars. Knowing exactly which direction he needs to travel, he sets his course. However, thick clouds soon obscure the stars from him, rendering him unable to verify that he’s traveling in the correct direction. For twenty nights, he floats along like this, wondering if he’s still going the right way. “The message of the constellations—had he imagined it because of his desperate circumstance?” Father Flynn asks. “Or had he seen Truth once, and now had to hold on to it without further reassurance?”

Father Flynn tells his congregation that the uncertainty the sailor experienced at sea is what it feels like to have a “crisis of faith.” He upholds that most people in the church know what this is like, so he tries to reassure them by saying, “Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone.”

Father Flynn’s sermon about doubt encourages the audience to consider the many different ways in which people can experience feelings of uncertainty. This interest makes sense for the play, considering that Doubt takes place in a religious setting. Consequently, the primary characters have devoted themselves to a life of faith, meaning that they most likely find moments of spiritual uncertainty especially alarming. However, Father Flynn suggests that doubt isn’t necessarily something that has to be feared, since it sometimes brings people together. In turn, the audience senses that doubt is a more complex emotion than it might otherwise seem.



The parable Father Flynn tells about the sailor is intended to symbolize the kind of blind faith true religious believers must adopt in order to feel comfortable about their spiritual convictions. Father Flynn implies that people have to “hold on” to their beliefs without constant “reassurance,” since there aren’t many times in a person’s life when the existence of God or heaven (for example) simply reveal themselves. In this way, then, Father Flynn advocates for the kind of unwavering belief that enables people to move forward with their convictions without requiring them to constantly analyze or interrogate them.



It’s worth noting that Father Flynn ends his sermon without clarifying whether or not the sailor actually reaches land. In turn, the notion of blindly trusting a certain idea or belief seems somewhat ill-advised, at least in the context of this play, since Shanley subtly implies that the kind of unequivocal faith that Father Flynn champions does indeed require a person to take a sizable risk. There is, it seems, no knowing what might happen when a person holds so tightly to an idea “without further reassurance”—after all, even Father Flynn’s parable doesn’t manage to prove that unwavering faith will always lead to positive outcomes.



SCENE 2

Sister Aloysius, the principal of St. Nicholas Church and School, sits in her office one day shortly after Father Flynn's sermon about doubt. As she writes at her desk with a fountain pen, a younger nun named Sister James approaches her office and asks, "I wondered if I might know what you did about William London?" Sister Aloysius explains that she sent the boy home, since his nose wouldn't stop bleeding. In turn, Sister James tells her that William's nose simply started "gushing" while the class was saying the Pledge of Allegiance. Hearing this, Sister Aloysius suggests that William may have purposefully given himself a nosebleed, and when Sister James expresses her surprise at such an idea, she adds, "You are a very innocent person, Sister James."

Turning her attention to Sister James's teaching style, Sister Aloysius asks if she's "in control" of her class. She also notes that most of the nuns send their students to the principal's office more often than Sister James does, but Sister James declares that she likes to "take care of things" herself. "That can be an error," replies Sister Aloysius. 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."

Sister Aloysius asks Sister James about a student named Donald Muller. When Sister James says that he's doing fine, Aloysius asks if anyone has hit him yet. James says that this hasn't happened and then turns to go, since she left her class with the art teacher. However, she senses something strange in Sister Aloysius's manner, so she asks if something is the matter. "No," Sister Aloysius replies. "Why? Is something the matter?" Sister James says that nothing is wrong and starts to leave, but Aloysius stops her by talking about William London again, pointing out that he had a **ballpoint pen**. "The students really should only be learning script with true fountain pens," she says. "Always the easy way out these days. What does that teach? Every easy choice today will have its consequence tomorrow."

In this scene, the audience quickly catches a glimpse of the fundamental difference between Sister Aloysius and Sister James. Whereas Sister Aloysius is stern and discerning, Sister James wants to see the best in people. As a result, she finds it astounding that Sister Aloysius would even suspect William of giving himself a bloody nose to get out of class. Her shock in this moment is worth keeping in mind as the play progresses, since she will later have to learn to live in a state of constant suspicion.



When Sister Aloysius scolds Sister James for trying to deal with misbehaving students on her own, she underlines the channels of power and communication that run throughout the Catholic Church. "There's a chain of discipline," she says, calling attention not only to the fact that the church has a firmly established sense of hierarchy, but also to the fact that Sister James is at the bottom of the institution's "chain" of power. She also reveals her belief that teachers should follow the pre-established customs of the church and school.



During this exchange, Sister Aloysius makes it clear that she is firmly committed to traditional ways of running a school. Not only does she disapprove of ballpoint pens over fountain pens, but she sees them as an "easy way out." This suggests that she's the kind of person who believes in hard work and integrity over progress and change. On another note, her odd repetition of Sister James's question regarding whether or not something is "the matter" is worth noting, since it indicates that she is worried about something but doesn't want to say what, exactly, it is. As a result, she hopes that Sister James will bring up whatever it is that she herself is thinking about.



Sister Aloysius tells Sister James to sit down, saying she has plenty of time before she needs to fetch her class. She then criticizes Sister James for giving such enthusiastic history lessons. “But I love History!” Sister James replies. “That is exactly my meaning,” says Sister Aloysius. “You favor History and risk swaying the children to value it over other subjects. I think this is a mistake.” Going on, she asks about various children in Sister James’s class, impressing James with her knowledge of each student. “I make it my business to know all forty-eight of their names,” Aloysius says, adding that she only says this to underline “the importance of paying attention.” “You must pay attention as well,” she says. Hearing this, James asks if she’s not meeting expectations, but Sister Aloysius doesn’t answer her, instead focusing again on talking about students.

Eventually, Sister Aloysius suggests that Sister James isn’t “working hard enough” because she isn’t strict enough with her students. Sister James begins to cry when she hears this, saying, “I thought you were satisfied with me.” Sister Aloysius disregards this idea, upholding that “satisfaction is a vice.” “Do you think that Socrates was satisfied?” she asks. “Good teachers are never content.” Continuing, she insists that the students need constant monitoring and guidance. “I cannot afford an excessively innocent instructor in my eighth grade class,” she says. “It’s self-indulgent. Innocence is a form of laziness. Innocent teachers are easily duped. You must be canny, Sister James.” She also says that students should be “uncomfortable” when they’re around Sister James. Furthermore, she says, “The heart is warm, but your wits must be cold.”

Sister James worries that behaving so strictly will only scare the children, saying that she wants her students to feel comfortable talking to her. “They’re children,” replies Sister Aloysius. “They can talk to each other. It’s more important they have a fierce moral guardian. You stand at the door, Sister. You are the gatekeeper. If you are vigilant, they will not need to be.” Having said this, she tells Sister James to keep a close watch on her classroom and to come to her if she needs help understanding anything.

It becomes clear in this conversation that Sister Aloysius is a somewhat domineering principal. The fact that she micromanages Sister James suggests that she’s quite picky and has very high standards, most likely because she wants to preserve a certain way of doing things at St. Nicholas School.



Sister Aloysius’s intensity comes to the forefront of the play in this moment, as she urges Sister James to be “cold” and to make her students feel “uncomfortable.” In this way, she devotes herself to a rather old-school style of education, one in which teachers are fearsome figures of authority rather than relatable role models.



The fact that Sister Aloysius instructs Sister James to keep an eye out for anything worth reporting aligns with the idea that she herself is worried about something. In turn, she urges Sister James to adopt a more suspicious, discerning outlook—one that is most likely out of step with the way Sister James normally sees the world. She also implies that Sister James has a moral responsibility to protect the children in her class. This responsibility, it seems, overshadows Sister James’s natural desire to be warm and relatable.



After talking for a moment about the teachers in the school who conduct the “specialty” classes (like Music and Art, for instance), Sister Aloysius asks what Sister James thinks about Father Flynn, who teaches both Physical Education and Religion. Sister James calls him “brilliant,” commenting on his strong public speaking abilities. At this point, Sister Aloysius asks her young coworker what she thought of Flynn’s sermon about doubt, wondering where he might have gotten the idea for it. “Is Father Flynn in Doubt, is he concerned that someone else is in Doubt?” she asks. In turn, Sister James says that Aloysius would have to pose that question to Flynn himself, but Aloysius says that she can’t because it wouldn’t be “appropriate,” since he’s her “superior.” “And if he were troubled, he should confess it to a fellow priest, or the monsignor,” she adds.

“I’m a little concerned,” Sister James says after Sister Aloysius pauses for a long time. Leaning forward, Aloysius asks, “About what?” However, Sister James merely replies, “The time. Art class will be over in a few minutes. I should go up.” Ignoring this, Aloysius asks if James has “noticed anything,” and when James asks what she means, she says, “I want you to be alert. [...] I’m sorry I’m not being more forthright, but I must be careful not to create something by saying it. I can only say I am concerned, perhaps needlessly, about matters in St. Nicholas School.” Sister James tries to guess what, exactly, Aloysius means by this, wondering aloud if she’s referring to the state of the school’s academics. “I wasn’t inviting a guessing game,” Aloysius snaps. “I want you to pay attention to your class.” Saying this, she sends James back to her students.

SCENE 3

In the gymnasium, Father Flynn holds a basketball and talks to a group of boys about how to shoot foul shots. “It’s psychological,” he says, saying that the hardest part about taking a foul shot is making sure to not overthink the task. Moving on, he comments on the fact that many of the boys have dirty fingernails. “I don’t want to see that,” he says, adding that it’s all right to have long nails as long as they’re clean. “Look at my nails,” he says. “They’re long, I like them a little long, but look at how clean they are. That makes it okay.” He then pokes fun at a student for having extremely “filthy paws,” suggesting that no girls will want to talk to him if they see his dirty nails. The group of students laugh at this, and Flynn “react[s] genially” to their laughter.

Sister Aloysius’s questions about Father Flynn suggest that she’s suspicious of him for some reason, though she doesn’t clarify why this might be the case. Her unwillingness to speak more directly about the matter is apparently linked to the Church’s hierarchal makeup, since she can’t address Flynn about her misgivings because he is her “superior.” Indeed, there is a very clear chain of command that is already set in place, one that dictates who can talk to whom. As a result, Sister Aloysius knows that it isn’t her place to ask Flynn if he’s in doubt because this is something he should bring up with his own superiors, not something he should talk to her about.



In this moment, the audience learns that Sister Aloysius is worried about something after all, which is why she keeps telling Sister James to pay close attention to the things happening around her. However, she’s unable to speak in a “forthright” manner about her concerns because she doesn’t want to ruin Sister James’s objectivity. This is because Sister James still has a relatively fresh perspective, since she’s a young teacher and rather new to St. Nicholas School. Consequently, Sister Aloysius tells her to “pay attention,” though it’s worth pointing out that even this will certainly infuse Sister James with suspicion and doubt about her surroundings.



In this scene, Shanley presents Father Flynn as a very likable man. As he talks to the boys about personal grooming, he makes jokes that endear him to them, ultimately casting him as an approachable adult. This, in turn, suggests that he most likely rejects Sister Aloysius’s belief that educators should be strict and fearsome authorities who scare their students. On the contrary, it seems obvious that he wants his students to like him and see him as friendly and welcoming.



SCENE 4

Sister James finds Sister Aloysius in the garden, where the older woman is bent over a rosebush. She tells Aloysius that the girls in her class are in music class and that the boys are in the rectory with Father Flynn, who's "giving them a talk" about "how to be a man." This intrigues Aloysius, who asks if Sister James has ever given the girls a talk about how to be a woman. "No. I wouldn't be competent," James replies, explaining that she took her vows at a very young age. When Aloysius points out that the founder of their order took her vows after living the life of a married woman with five children, James wonders aloud "how she managed so much in one life." Hearing this, Aloysius reveals that she herself was married before becoming a nun. Her husband, apparently, died in World War II.

Changing the subject, Sister Aloysius says that she used to spend quite a lot of time in the garden. Now, though, Monsignor Benedict walks through the garden at unpredictable times, and since nuns are "discouraged from crossing paths with priests unattended," she has stopped coming so often, for fear that she might run into him. "The monsignor is very good, isn't he?" Sister James asks, and though Aloysius agrees with her, she also points out that Monsignor Benedict is "oblivious." "I don't believe he knows who's President of the United States."

Moving on, Sister Aloysius asks Sister James how Donald Muller is doing, wondering if anyone has hit him yet. When James says that nobody has, she states that somebody will eventually. "I'm not so sure anyone will," James says, but Aloysius disagrees with her, pointing out that Donald Muller is the school's first black student and that a number of the parents who send their children to St. Nicholas School aren't especially open to the idea of racial integration. Still, James insists that nobody will bother Donald because Father Flynn has become his "protector." Upon hearing this, Sister Aloysius goes "rigid" and suddenly stands up. "He's taken an interest," Sister James explains. "Since Donald went on the altar boys. I thought I should tell you." In response, Aloysius says, "I told you to come to me, but I hoped you never would."

The fact that Sister Aloysius used to have a husband indicates that she has a more complex history than one might expect. Despite her convictions about doing things in a traditional manner, she hasn't always lived the life of a nun. This, in turn, suggests that she knows what it's like to live a secular life—an idea that is hard to imagine now that she so fully embodies the ideals of the Catholic Church. Indeed, it is perhaps because she came to Catholicism relatively late in her life that she's so eager to devote herself to the religion's customs and so unwilling to adopt new ways of doing things.



As the play progresses, it's important to remember that Monsignor is "oblivious," since he is the person with the most power at St. Nicholas Church and School. This is significant because his cluelessness effectively means that people like Sister Aloysius are left to fend for themselves if they ever need help.



Sister Aloysius's concerns about Donald Muller getting picked on because of his race demonstrate the school's struggle to embrace change. Although she herself generally opposes change, she is apparently open to the idea of racial integration, but she worries that other people are not. When Sister James says that Father Flynn has "taken an interest" in Donald, though, Aloysius's concerns shift, as she clearly suspects that Flynn is sexually abusing Donald. This is made evident when she says, "I told you to come to me, but I hoped you never would." Suddenly, then, the audience sees that her suspicions about St. Nicholas School have—at least in her mind—been confirmed.



Sister James wonders if she shouldn't have told Sister Aloysius about Father Flynn's "special interest" in Donald Muller, but Aloysius doesn't listen. "I knew once you did [come to me], something would be set in motion," she says. "So it's happened." Sister James is shocked when she hears this. "What?!" she replies. "I'm not telling you that! I'm not even certain what you mean." Despite this sentiment, Aloysius insists that James knows *exactly* what she means—an idea that upsets Sister James, who admits that she has been "trying to become more cold" in her thinking. This, however, has been quite unpleasant for her. "I want to be guided by you and responsible to the children," she says, "but I want my peace of mind."

Going on, Sister James says that she yearns for "the return of [her] peace of mind," but Sister Aloysius informs her that she "may not have it." "It is not your place to be complacent," she says. "That's for the children. That's what we give them." James admits that she understands this, but she still feels like she's "less close to God" now that she has adopted a sense of constant suspicion. "When you take a step to address wrongdoing, you are taking a step away from God, but in His service," Sister Aloysius replies, insisting that "dealing with such matters is hard and thankless work."

Sister James insists that she's not "certain" that anything inappropriate is happening between Father Flynn and Donald Muller. However, Sister Aloysius says that they can't "wait" until they know for sure that something has happened. As she thinks about how exactly to handle the situation, she notes that "there are parameters" that protect Father Flynn. She then asks Sister James what she has seen, and James says that Father Flynn took Donald Muller to the rectory by himself. "Of all the children. Donald Muller. I suppose it makes sense," Aloysius says, pointing out that the boy is already "isolated." Still, James insists that perhaps nothing has happened. "Then why do you look like you've seen the Devil?" Aloysius asks, and James admits that she was troubled by the way Donald acted upon returning to class after spending time alone with Father Flynn in the rectory.

It's worth explicitly acknowledging that, although neither of them have fully articulated it, Sister Aloysius and Sister James are discussing whether or not Father Flynn has sexually abused Donald Muller. "So it's happened," Sister Aloysius concludes, as if she already suspected this and now feels as if her worries have been confirmed. Sister James, on the other hand, is eager to convince herself that she's making a big deal out of nothing, which is why she pretends to not even know what Sister Aloysius is talking about. At the same time, she admits that she has been trying to be objective and "cold," and that this has deeply unsettled her. This, in turn, suggests that she knows exactly what Sister Aloysius is talking about, since she's obviously troubled by the possibility that Father Flynn has abused Donald.



During this conversation, Sister Aloysius forces Sister James to see herself as an unfailing guardian of her students' wellbeing. This, she claims, leaves no room for "complacen[cy]" or mental laziness. As a result, it's necessary for the nuns to take on the "thankless" task of vigilantly looking out for the children, even if this means losing their "peace of mind."



Sister Aloysius is hyperaware of the fact that Donald Muller is the school's first and only black student. This awareness isn't just the result of her general sensitivity to change, it's also due to her understanding that Father Flynn has taken advantage of the boy's vulnerability. As the only black student, he is "isolated" from others which makes him both in need of a "protector" or guide and also vulnerable to abuse. While Father Flynn seems to have sought to mentor Donald, it also seems he has done this in an inappropriate way, using his position of authority to establish an unhealthy relationship with a boy who has seemingly nobody else to turn to.



Sister James reveals that Donald had alcohol on his breath after spending time with Father Flynn in the rectory. Deep in thought, Sister Aloysius considers what to do, noting that she once dealt with a similar situation at a different Catholic school. Back then, though, she worked with a monsignor who was willing to stand behind her and help pursue the matter. “Here, there’s no man I can go to, and men run everything,” she says. “We are going to have to stop [Flynn] ourselves.” At this point, Sister James suggests that Sister Aloysius should simply “report” her “suspicions” to Monsignor Benedict, but Aloysius disregards this idea, saying that Monsignor Benedict would just ask Father Flynn and then believe whatever the priest says. “If I tell the monsignor and he is satisfied with Father Flynn’s rebuttal, the matter is suppressed,” she says.

“Well then tell the bishop,” Sister James suggests when she grasps that Sister Aloysius can’t tell Monsignor Benedict about her suspicions. However, Aloysius reminds her that the Catholic Church has a certain “hierarchy” that “does not permit” her to do this. “Once I tell the monsignor, it’s out of my hands, I’m helpless,” she says. Because of this, she decides to come up with a reason to get Father Flynn to visit her office. She tells Sister James that she will have to be there, too, since nuns aren’t allowed to be alone with priests. “I can’t do it!” says Sister James. “Would you rather leave the boy to be exploited?” Sister Aloysius asks. “And don’t think this will be the only story. If you close your eyes, you will be a party to all that comes after.”

After a long conversation, Sister Aloysius finally convinces Sister James to help her confront Father Flynn. “If I could, Sister James, I would certainly choose to live in innocence,” she adds before they part ways. “But innocence can only be wisdom in a world without evil. Situations arise and we are confronted with wrongdoing and the need to act.”

Sister Aloysius can't bring her concerns to Monsignor Benedict because he is more likely to listen to Father Flynn than to her. In this moment, then, the audience sees the Church's flawed chain of command, where the voice of a well-respected nun is undervalued when set against the word of a priest. Simply put, because Monsignor Benedict would most likely take Father Flynn's side, there's no good way to hold Flynn accountable for his actions.



Again, it becomes clear that the “hierarchy” in the Catholic Church makes it difficult for Sister Aloysius to make sure Father Flynn is held accountable for his actions. Unable to go directly to the bishop, she’s forced to handle the matter on her own—a difficult burden that will likely bring trouble her way. Nevertheless, she’s willing to pursue the matter because she sees it as her moral duty to protect the children of St. Nicholas School. She tries to impress this upon Sister James by pointing out that ignoring this situation would mean enabling Father Flynn to continue to do whatever he wants, thereby giving him the chance to continue abusing children.



When Sister Aloysius says that she would prefer to “live in innocence” if she could, she acknowledges Sister James’s desire to regain the “peace of mind” she had before living in a state of constant suspicion. However, she also notes that it’s impossible to live in “innocence” when there are so many “evil[s]” in the surrounding world. Unable to ignore these evils, she devotes herself to addressing them head-on, seeing it as her ethical responsibility to pay attention to such matters.



SCENE 5

Sister Aloysius sets up a meeting with Father Flynn on the pretense of discussing the Christmas pageant. When he and Sister James arrive, she offers them tea. Father Flynn accepts and requests **sugar**. “Yes!” Aloysius says, searching her desk drawer. She says that she gave sugar up for Lent and then never thought to start using it again. “It mustn’t have been much to give up then,” Flynn says. As Aloysius puts a lump of sugar in his tea, she glances at Flynn’s nails, and he tells her that he likes them “a little long.” He then asks her to put three lumps of sugar into the tea. “Three,” Aloysius repeats, clearly “appalled.” “Sweet tooth,” Flynn replies. Moving on, Aloysius thanks Flynn for coming, and he says that he was happy to because he’s eager to “rethink” the Christmas pageant, which he thinks has become a bit “woebegone.”

Father Flynn suggests that the children should sing a secular song at the Christmas pageant this year. He proposes the song “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas,” and Sister James eagerly cuts in, saying, “Or ‘Frosty the Snowman.’” Flynn likes this idea, too, but Aloysius objects, saying, “‘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.” As she says this, Father Flynn takes out a small notebook and writes something down. “May I ask what you wrote down? With that **ballpoint pen**,” Sister Aloysius inquires. Flynn tells her that it’s an idea for a sermon, and when she asks what the idea was, he replies, “Intolerance.”

Father Flynn explains that he believes it would be good for the Christmas pageant to make the Catholic Church seem more welcoming. “I think a message of the Second Ecumenical Council was that the Church needs to take on a more familiar face,” he says. “Reflect the local community. We should sing a song from the radio now and then. Take the kids out for ice cream.”

Shanley uses Father Flynn’s “sweet tooth” to frame him as an insatiable man, the type of person who simply takes what he wants regardless of what other people think. This, of course, accords with Sister Aloysius’s suspicion that he has sexually abused Donald Muller, which is why she is so “appalled” by his refusal to restrain his appetite in this moment. In this way, Shanley underhandedly confirms Aloysius’s suspicions about Father Flynn.



Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius’s differences come to the forefront of the play in this scene. Father Flynn’s suggestion that the children sing a secular song at the Christmas pageant goes against Sister Aloysius’s traditional sensibilities, as does his use of a ballpoint pen. Conversely, he finds her unwillingness to embrace change as a sign of “intolerance.” Consequently, they find themselves at odds with one another even before Sister Aloysius accuses him of molesting Donald Muller.



Even before she says anything, the audience anticipates that Sister Aloysius will disagree with Father Flynn’s desire to give the Catholic Church a “more familiar face.” After all, this doesn’t accord with her devotion to traditional religious sensibilities, which don’t take into account what the “local community” might want to see from the Church.



Sister Aloysius begins to argue against Father Flynn’s ideas regarding the Church taking on a “more familiar face,” but Flynn suggests that they get back on topic, so she returns to the subject of the Christmas pageant, saying, “We must be careful how Donald Muller is used in the pageant.” When Flynn asks if this is because Donald is black, Aloysius says that it is, since she thinks they’ll have to be conscientious about where, exactly, they place him onstage. “I think he should be treated like every other boy,” Flynn says. “You yourself singled the boy out for special attention,” Sister Aloysius replies. “You held a private meeting with him at the rectory.” Flynn perks up at this, realizing that something is afoot. “What are we talking about?” he asks, and Sister Aloysius tells him that Donald Muller “acted strangely” after spending time alone with Flynn in the rectory.

Father Flynn plays dumb, acting surprised that Donald Muller seemed off in class after spending time with him in the rectory. Nevertheless, Sister Aloysius asks him to explain why this might be the case. “Hmmm,” Flynn says. “Did you want to discuss the pageant, is that why I’m here, or is this what you wanted to discuss?” In response, Aloysius admits that *this* is the topic she wants to address, prompting Flynn to say that he’s “uncomfortable” with her “tone.” “If I had judged my conversation with Donald Muller to be of concern to you, Sister, I would have sat you down and talked to you about it,” he says. “But I did not judge it to be of concern to you.” Hearing this, Sister Aloysius suggests that Flynn is “mistaken” regarding what “concerns” her, since Donald’s “well-being is [her] responsibility” and, thus, is of concern to her.

Once again, Father Flynn takes issue with Sister Aloysius’s “tone,” but she says that such matters are beside the point. “You know what I’m talking about,” she says, prompting him to say that he isn’t “answerable” to her. He then informs her that he doesn’t want to keep having this conversation, saying that she can address the matter with Monsignor Benedict if she wants. “I can only imagine that your unfortunate behavior this morning is the result of overwork,” he adds. “Perhaps you need a leave of absence. I may suggest it.” Just as he’s about to exit the office, though, Sister Aloysius says, “There was alcohol on his breath.”

During this exchange, Sister Aloysius finally manages to turn the conversation toward Donald Muller. Transitioning away from talking about the Christmas pageant, she references the fact that Flynn has “singled out” Donald for “special attention,” and though she hasn’t actually accused him of anything yet, it’s obvious that he is suddenly on his guard. “What are we talking about?” he says, sensing Aloysius’s suspicion. This interaction perfectly captures the delicate nature of such situations, demonstrating why it would be better if Aloysius were able to trust the monsignor to have this conversation. After all, Father Flynn is technically Sister Aloysius’s superior, meaning that she has to be especially careful about how she broaches this topic.



When Father Flynn says that his conversation with Donald doesn’t “concern” Sister Aloysius, he subtly reminds her that he has a more powerful position than she does in the Catholic Church. He implies that it is up to him whether or not he chooses to share information with Sister Aloysius—an idea that emphasizes his authority and frames her as his subordinate. In this way, he manipulates his position of power so that it’s even harder than it already is for Sister Aloysius to hold him accountable for his actions.



Father Flynn’s suggestion that Sister Aloysius needs a “leave of absence” is a veiled threat, especially since he says that he might “suggest it.” Once again, he references the fact that he is in a position of power over her. This encourages the audience to have their own doubts about whether he has molested Donald Muller, since he’s actively trying to intimidate Sister Aloysius into dropping the matter. On another note, his proposal that Aloysius talk directly to Monsignor Benedict illustrates just how certain he is that the monsignor will stand up for and protect him, whether he’s guilty or not.



Father Flynn stops and tells Sister Aloysius that she shouldn't have brought up the alcohol on Donald's breath. He then claims Donald was caught drinking altar wine and that, when he heard this news, he "sent" for the boy. "He begged not to be removed from the altar boys. And I took pity on him. I told him if no one else found out, I would let him stay on," he says. This immediately relieves Sister James, who rejoices in the idea that Father Flynn was only trying to "protect" Donald. Going on, Flynn says that he will have to "remove" Donald from the altar boys, since Sister Aloysius brought up the issue. He also points out that Donald is the school's first black student, which influenced his decision to keep the matter quiet. Now, he says, "a certain ignorant element in the parish will be confirmed in their beliefs."

Just before Father Flynn leaves, he tells Sister Aloysius that he's "not pleased" by how she "handled" this situation. "Next time you are troubled by dark ideas, I suggest you speak to the monsignor," he says. Once he's gone, Sister Aloysius says she doesn't believe him. Sister James, for her part, has chosen to take what Flynn said at face value, so Sister Aloysius points out that it's "easier to believe him" than it is to remain suspicious. She also suggests that Sister James isn't actually "convinced," but merely wants to "have simplicity back." In response, James accuses Aloysius of persecuting Flynn for petty matters, like his use of a **ballpoint pen** and his openness to having the children sing secular songs. Still, Aloysius remains true to what she believes, so she picks up the phone and calls Donald's mother, inviting her to come to the school at her earliest convenience.

SCENE 6

Father Flynn delivers a sermon shortly after his conversation with Sister Aloysius. He tells a parable about gossip, saying that a woman once spoke badly about a man she barely knew. That night, she dreamt that a "great hand appeared over her and pointed down at her." The next day, she went to confession. After she explained the dream, the priest told her to go home, take a pillow onto her roof, and use a knife to cut it open. When she followed his instructions, she returned, and the priest asked what happened. She told him that the pillow's feathers flew all about. "Now I want you to go back and gather up every last feather that flew out on the wind," the priest said, and when she said that this would be impossible, he told her that this is the nature of gossip, too.

Father Flynn manipulatively references Donald's race in this moment, claiming that he was only trying to "protect" the boy from the racist conclusions people might draw about him upon finding out that he was kicked out of the altar boys. By saying this, Flynn effectively frames himself as a sympathetic man who is beyond reproach. Rather than recognizing that it is Sister Aloysius's moral responsibility to look into whether or not the children are safe, he tries to present her as a ruthless and mean woman who has done Donald harm.



Once more, Father Flynn reminds Sister Aloysius of the chain of command that prevails over St. Nicholas Church and School. In doing so, he underlines the fact that she is his subordinate. This, however, does nothing to discourage Sister Aloysius, who most likely sees Father Flynn's attempt to intimidate her as further evidence that he has an inappropriate relationship with Donald (though she has no concrete proof beyond her own doubts). Consequently, she tries to show Sister James that simply believing Flynn would be a complacent thing to do. But Sister James is so used to warmly accepting people that she finds Aloysius's suspicion detestable. So, she lashes out at her in an attempt to maintain her own naivety—and if Father Flynn's really is lying, Sister James is vulnerable to being manipulated by him.



It's fairly obvious that Father Flynn's sermon about gossip is directed at Sister Aloysius, who he believes is besmirching his name and reputation by accusing him of molesting Donald. The fact that he uses his platform as a priest to deliver this message in such a veiled but pointed way demonstrates once again how willing he is to use his power to intimidate Sister Aloysius. By telling this parable about gossip in a religious setting, he associates Sister Aloysius's behavior with something sinful and wrong, appealing to her spiritual beliefs because he knows that the majority of her convictions come from her religious devotion.



SCENE 7

Not long after Father Flynn's sermon about gossip, he encounters Sister James in the garden. He asks why she seems so "subdued," and she admits that she hasn't been sleeping well. She then asks if his sermon was "directed at anyone in particular," and he insinuates that it was aimed at Sister Aloysius. Changing the subject, Sister James tells Flynn that she just received news that her brother is sick. He suggests that she visit her brother, but she says she can't leave her class. "How's Donald Muller doing?" Flynn suddenly asks, explaining that he himself has stopped talking to the boy "for fear of it being misunderstood." This, he believes, is a "shame." He then asks if Sister James is "against" him, and she confesses that she doesn't know what to think. "I wish I knew nothing whatever about it," she says.

Father Flynn tells Sister James that he feels like his "reputation has been damaged." He then insists that he hasn't done anything, saying that "the most innocent actions can appear sinister to the poisoned mind." He also says that he would take the matter to Monsignor Benedict if he weren't so worried that it would "tear apart the school." "Sister Aloysius would most certainly lose her position as principal if I made her accusations known," he says. "Since they're baseless. You might lose your place as well." In response, James asks if Flynn is "threatening" her, but he denies this.

Continuing to defend himself, Father Flynn claims that he cares about Donald's wellbeing more than Sister Aloysius does. "That black boy needs a helping hand or he's not going to make it here!" he says. "But if she has her way, he'll be left to his own undoing." Going on, he insists that Sister Aloysius only dislikes him because he treats students in a "human way." This, he believes, is her attempt to keep the parish in "the Dark Ages." Turning to Sister James, he says, "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. I don't believe that. 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 conversation, Father Flynn tries to appeal to Sister James's sensitivity. To do this, he presents himself as someone whom Donald Muller depended upon and looked up to. Now, he suggests, Donald has nobody. What he doesn't say, of course, is that this is partially Sister James's fault, since she's the one who brought her concerns to Sister Aloysius in the first place. By showing her the supposedly unfortunate consequences of her actions, then, Father Flynn tries to make her feel guilty about what she's done.



Yet again, Father Flynn makes a casual reference to the fact that he is more powerful than both Sister Aloysius and Sister James. By reminding Sister James that Monsignor Benedict would surely take his side if he were to get involved, Flynn tries to make Sister James feel as if she has no resources or support. This is his attempt to encourage her to drop the matter altogether—something she's seemingly quite likely to do, since she wishes that she "knew nothing whatever about it" in the first place.



When Father Flynn says that people like Sister Aloysius want to "kill kindness in the name of virtue," he speaks directly to the fact that Sister James hates living in a constant state of suspicion. She wants to be a warm and friendly teacher who approaches her students with kindness, not unyielding authority. Father Flynn seems to know she feels this way, so he appeals to this sentiment by saying that she should nurture "the light in [her] heart."



Father Flynn reminds Sister James that Jesus Christ spread a message about love, “not suspicion, disapproval and judgment.” He then asks if she finds Sister Aloysius to be a “positive inspiration,” and she’s forced to admit that she does not. “She’s taken away my joy of teaching,” she says. As she begins to cry, Father Flynn “pats” her and tells her that she’s “not alone” with her feelings. “I’m sorry your brother is ill,” he adds, at which point she tells him that she doesn’t think he abused Donald Muller.

At the end of their conversation, Father Flynn successfully gets Sister James to say that she’s no longer suspicious of him. And though she might be convinced of his innocence, it’s rather apparent that Father Flynn simply manipulated her into saying this by showing her the kind of compassion she so desperately craves from her superiors, which she never receives from Sister Aloysius. Once again, then, Father Flynn uses his position of power to his own benefit.



SCENE 8

Mrs. Muller visits Sister Aloysius’s office. She is hesitant and clearly afraid that Donald has gotten into trouble. She admits that he made a mistake by drinking altar wine, but adds that he “knows what an opportunity he has” at St. Nicholas School. “I think the whole thing was just a bit much for him,” she explains, suggesting that being the school’s first black student has put him under a lot of pressure. She also adds that his father “beat the hell out of him over that wine,” and when Aloysius says that he shouldn’t have done that, Mrs. Muller defends her husband, saying that he didn’t want Donald to come to St. Nicholas in the first place. “Thought he’d have a lot of trouble with the other boys,” she says. This, however, hasn’t been the case, she says, since Father Flynn has been “watching out” for Donald.

Right away, it becomes clear in Mrs. Muller’s conversation with Sister Aloysius that she sees Father Flynn as a positive force in her son’s life. This, it seems, will make it even harder for Sister Aloysius to inform her that Flynn might be sexually abusing Donald, especially because Mrs. Muller believes that Father Flynn is the only reason that Donald has been able to successfully integrate into an all-white school.



Mrs. Muller says that Donald talks about Father Flynn at home, saying that he “looks up to him.” “Mrs. Muller,” Sister Aloysius cuts in, “we may have a problem.” Immediately, Mrs. Muller says that whatever is wrong, Donald only has to make it at St. Nicholas School until June, when he’ll leave for high school. This, she says, is all she cares about. “I’m concerned about the relationship between Father Flynn and your son,” Aloysius says. To clarify, she says that Father Flynn “may have made advances” on Donald. “May have made,” Mrs. Muller says. “No evidence?” When Aloysius says that there hasn’t been any hard evidence of abuse, Mrs. Muller suggests that there must be “nothing to it.” Still, Aloysius outlines the situation concerning the altar wine. “I think I understand the kind of thing you’re talking about. But I don’t want to get into it,” Mrs. Muller says.

Mrs. Muller is unwilling to entertain the possibility that her son is suffering abuse at the hands of Father Flynn. This is because she sees Father Flynn as a positive figure in Donald’s life—an idea that is no doubt fueled by the fact that Donald’s very own father is violent toward him. Furthermore, she believes that Donald’s time at St. Nicholas School will help him continue on an upward trajectory. Accordingly, she would rather have him finish the eighth grade under seemingly any circumstances, just so he can go on to a good high school and secure a better future for himself. Needless to say, though, this outlook doesn’t align with Sister Aloysius’s sense that it is her moral responsibility to protect Donald from all forms of harm, immediate or otherwise.



Mrs. Muller points out that whatever is happening between Father Flynn and Donald isn't Donald's fault. Sister Aloysius agrees with this, believing that Father Flynn should get in trouble, not Donald. However, Mrs. Muller points out that she's the one in the principal's office talking about Donald. "Why isn't the priest in the principal's office," she asks. Sister Aloysius has a hard time addressing this line of inquiry, and Mrs. Muller continues to suggest that Donald is going to be the one who suffers if news gets out about what Flynn has done to him. "You're not going against no *man* in a *robe* and win, Sister," she says. "[Flynn]'s got the position." In response, Aloysius says, "And he's got your son," to which Mrs. Muller says, "Let him have 'im then." When Aloysius expresses her disbelief at this sentiment, Mrs. Muller says, "It's just till June."

Mrs. Muller tells Sister Aloysius that Donald 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," she says. She also explains that Donald came to St. Nicholas School because the kids at public school were going to "kill him." "His father don't like him," she says. "He comes here, the kids don't like him. One man is good to him. The 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." Going on, she says certain things aren't "black and white." In addition, she hints at the fact that Donald might be gay, but Aloysius dismisses this idea, saying that she's focusing only on "actions," not "inclination[s]."

Appalled by Mrs. Muller's reaction to Donald's alleged abuse, Aloysius threatens to throw the boy out of school just to protect him. "It won't end with your son," she says. "There will be others, if there aren't already." In response, Mrs. Muller tells her to throw out Father Flynn instead, and Aloysius says that this is exactly what she's trying to do. Standing, Mrs. Muller tells Aloysius to leave Donald and her out of this entire ordeal. "You may think you're doing good, but the world's a hard place. I don't know that you and me are on the same side. I'll be standing with my son and those who are good with my son. It'd be nice to see you there," she says before leaving.

Mrs. Muller demonstrates her understanding of the unfortunate fact that Sister Aloysius is at an extreme disadvantage when it comes to challenging Father Flynn in the male-dominated world of the Catholic Church. She suggests that Sister Aloysius is doomed to fail and that, because of this, she should leave the matter alone, since it might harm Donald (this, at least, is what Mrs. Muller thinks). As a result, Mrs. Muller thinks Donald should simply endure whatever is happening to him until he can leave St. Nicholas School in June. Once again, then, she expresses an opinion that goes against Sister Aloysius's sense that she has an ethical duty to protect her students regardless of the circumstances.



In this moment, Mrs. Muller clarifies why she doesn't want to pursue the possibility that Father Flynn is abusing her son. She explains that she is worried first and foremost about his future, which is why she doesn't want to question why, exactly, Father Flynn treats Donald with kindness. This, she believes, is irrelevant. However, what she fails to recognize is that undergoing sexual abuse would likely impact Donald's future, since he would most likely have to deal with the emotional fallout of an inappropriate relationship with an adult. If Sister Aloysius's suspicions are correct—which remains uncertain—Father Flynn's abuse would almost certainly be harmful to Donald's mental health in the long run, even if he currently takes comfort in Flynn's interest.



Sister Aloysius's statement that she'll kick Donald out of school in order to protect him from Father Flynn illustrates just how intensely she believes it's up to her to keep the children in her school safe. Trying to impress this upon Mrs. Muller, she points out that Father Flynn will continue to molest young boys if he isn't stopped—an idea intended to weigh on Mrs. Muller's conscience and ultimately convince her to stand up to the priest. It is, of course, unclear if this is really true—neither the characters nor the audience know if Flynn is guilty—but it nevertheless encourages both the audience and Mrs. Muller to view this situation with skepticism. However, Mrs. Muller refuses to acknowledge that Father Flynn's alleged inappropriate behavior toward her son will impact him in the long run, instead focusing only on the boy's immediate future.



Just as Mrs. Muller leaves Sister Aloysius's office, Father Flynn comes barreling forward and asks if he can enter. "We would require a third party," Aloysius says, but Flynn ignores her, asking why Mrs. Muller was at St. Nicholas School. He then closes the door and tells her that it's time they have a private conversation, without a "third party." "You have to stop this campaign against me!" he says, and she calmly informs him that he can stop it himself whenever he likes. "How?" he asks. "Confess and resign," she responds. In a rage, he accuses her of ruining his reputation and keeping the parish from becoming a "welcoming church" where students can experience a "progressive education."

Father Flynn suggests that Sister Aloysius has been suspicious of him long before this incident, and she admits that this is true, saying that she saw him touch William London's wrist on the first day of school. As she says this, he furiously writes in his notebook, recording what she says so that he can explain to Monsignor Benedict why she should be "removed." This doesn't bother Sister Aloysius, who calmly tells him that she called his previous parish that morning and spoke to a nun there. "That's not the proper route for you to have taken, Sister!" Flynn yells. "The Church is very clear. You're supposed to go through the pastor." In response, Aloysius suggests that Flynn probably has an "understanding" with his former pastor.

Sister Aloysius says that Father Flynn has a "history" as an abuser, pointing out that St. Nicholas is his third parish in only five years. "I am a good priest!" he insists. "And there is nothing in my record to suggest otherwise." Ignoring this, Aloysius hypothesizes that he will continue to go after children until he is "stopped." Trying to ignore her, Flynn says that Aloysius doesn't have any actual "proof" against him. "But I have my certainty, and armed with that, I will go to your last parish, and the one before that if necessary," she says. "I will find a parent, Father Flynn! Trust me I will. A parent who probably doesn't know that you are *still working with children!* And once I do that, you will be exposed."

Once again, Shanley emphasizes the differences between Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius. When Father Flynn barges in and refuses to wait for a "third party" to accompany him, the audience sees just how little he cares about preserving the Catholic Church's traditional rules and regulations—customs to which Sister Aloysius has devoted her entire life. In this way, their confrontation begins with a display of just how much their ideals clash with one another, as Father Flynn tries to lord his power over Sister Aloysius while she tries and fails to use the power of the Catholic Church to keep him at bay.



Once more, Father Flynn references the Catholic Church's chain of command, trying to devalue Sister Aloysius's ability to hold him accountable for his actions. This time, however, he seems more desperate than intimidating, since what she claims to have done is out of his hands. On another note, it's worth pointing out that Sister Aloysius has been suspicious of Father Flynn since the first day of school, which is most likely why she told Sister James to be on the lookout in the first place. Rather than blindly believing in the morality of the parish's priest, she took it upon herself to keep a watchful eye on him, effectively ignoring his parable about the sailor—which advocated for unquestioned faith—in order to responsibly address her concerns.



Father Flynn says that there's "nothing in [his] record" to suggest that he has a history as a sexual abuser. This casts doubt on Sister Aloysius's accusations, but it's also poor indication of whether or not he has molested children, since it's clear that he surrounds himself with people who will vouch for him regardless of what he's done. This, it seems, is exactly what Monsignor Benedict would do if Sister Aloysius brought her concerns to him. So, although Flynn's guilt is still uncertain, it's nonetheless clear that if he is guilty, he won't be punished for his actions. Once again, then, Shanley suggests that the power structure of the Catholic Church enables people who abuse their authority to avoid accountability for their misdeeds.



Once again, Father Flynn insists that Sister Aloysius has “no right to act on [her] own.” “You are a member of a religious order,” he says. “You have taken vows, obedience being one! You answer to us! You have no right to step outside the Church!” Nevertheless, Aloysius assures him that she will “step outside the Church” if that’s what the situation requires, even if this means the end of her affiliation with the Church. “Now, did you give Donald Muller wine to drink?” she asks, to which he says, “Have you ever done anything wrong?” She affirms that she has, and when he asks if she has committed “mortal sin[s],” she says, “Yes.” He then asks her what happened after she made this sort of mistake, and she says, “I confessed it! Did you give Donald Muller wine to drink?”

Father Flynn continues to deny that he abused Donald. “Very well then,” Sister Aloysius says. “If you won’t leave my office, I will. And once I go, I will not stop.” As she goes to leave, he tells her to wait. Turning, she says, “You will request a transfer from this parish. You will take a leave of absence until it is granted.” Pleading his case once more, he asks her to consider his humanity, saying, “Am I a person flesh and blood like you? Or are we just ideas and convictions. I can’t say everything. Do 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. Even if you feel certainty, it is an emotion and not a fact.” Having said this, he says that he “appeal[s]” to Aloysius, putting himself “in [her] hands.”

“Where’s your compassion?” Father Flynn asks when Sister Aloysius refuses to pity him. “Nowhere you can get at it,” she replies. “Stay here. Compose yourself. Use the phone if you like. Good day, Father. I have no sympathy for you. I know you’re invulnerable to true regret.” Then, just before she leaves, she says, “And cut your nails.” Once she’s gone, Father Flynn walks to the door and dials a number. “Yes,” he says. “This is Father Brendan Flynn of St. Nicholas parish. I need to make an appointment to see the bishop.”

Again, the audience sees Sister Aloysius’s unyielding determination to find out the truth. In this moment, she admits that she has made mistakes herself, but she stresses the fact that she has always “confessed” her sins. By saying this, she urges Father Flynn to come clean, even as he tries to appeal to her humanity. Because she’s so devoted to protecting children like Donald Muller, though, she isn’t susceptible to his manipulative tactics.



Father Flynn upholds that he “can’t say everything,” which is intentionally ambiguous on Shanley’s part. Flynn could mean that he can’t give Sister Aloysius an explanation that will satisfy her and relieve her doubt, since only he and Donald will ever know what happened during their meeting. However, it’s also possible that he did molest Donald, and that he’s implying that he can’t bring himself to fully confess to what he’s done, since doing so would make him feel too guilty. Neither Sister Aloysius nor the audience can know for sure what he means, which is reflected in Flynn’s statement that Sister Aloysius can’t possibly feel any sense of “certainty” regarding this situation. This could be read as him trying to destabilize her convictions by using his conception of doubt against her, suggesting that one can never be sure about anything. This, of course, doesn’t quite accord with what he says at the beginning of the play, when he urges his congregants to blindly follow their beliefs. Now, he wants Sister Aloysius to see her convictions as fickle and inaccurate, though it’s obvious that this tactic won’t work on her, since she’s so committed to her moral responsibility to protect children like Donald Muller.



As soon as Sister Aloysius is gone, Father Flynn calls the bishop. While the play does not show the substance of this conversation, it seems that Father Flynn is making use of the Catholic Church’s power structures, effectively trying once again to use his position of authority to escape accountability for his actions (if he’s guilty) and/or damage to his reputation (if Sister Aloysius publicly accuses him of pedophilia, regardless of whether or not he’s guilty). It seems that Flynn is correct that Sister Aloysius (and indeed the audience) will never have certainty regarding the nature of his relationship with Donald. But the play nevertheless encourages the audience to see that institutions like the Church consolidate power in a way that allows people who are guilty of misdeeds to go unpunished.



SCENE 9

One sunny day, Sister James and Sister Aloysius see one another in the garden. Sister James has just gotten back from visiting her sick brother, who has recovered. She remarks that Father Flynn is gone and asks where he's been sent. "St. Jerome's," Sister Aloysius says. Sister James points out that Donald Muller is "heartbroken that he's gone," but Aloysius assures her that nothing can be done about this. "It's just till June," she adds. Hearing this, Sister James admits that she doesn't think Flynn did anything wrong. When she sees Aloysius's disagreement, though, she asks if the older woman ever actually proved his guiltiness, and she tells her that she did in fact do this, though only to herself.

"I wish I could be like you," Sister James says, and when Sister Aloysius asks why, she says, "Because I can't sleep at night anymore. Everything seems uncertain to me." In response, Sister Aloysius says, "Maybe we're not supposed to sleep so well. They've made Father Flynn the pastor of St. Jerome." By way of explanation, she says that the bishop is the one who gave him this position. "It's a promotion," she adds. She says that she informed Monsignor Benedict about what happened between Flynn and Donald, but Monsignor Benedict didn't believe her. "Then why did Father Flynn leave? What did you say to make him go?" James asks, and Aloysius says she told him that she called a nun in his "previous parish."

"So you did prove it!" Sister James says, but Sister Aloysius tells her that she was lying when she claimed to have called Father Flynn's former parish. This shocks Sister James, who can't believe that Aloysius would dare tell a lie, which is itself a sin. "But if he had no such history, the lie wouldn't have worked," Aloysius explains. "His resignation was his confession. He was what I thought he was. And he's gone." Still, James can't get over the lie, saying, "I can't believe you lied." In response, Aloysius says, "In the pursuit of wrongdoing, one steps away from God. Of course there's a price." Despite this conviction, though, she suddenly exclaims, "Oh, Sister James!" When James asks what's wrong, she merely says, "I have doubts! I have such doubts!"

In this exchange, the audience learns that Father Flynn is no longer at St. Nicholas School. This, Sister James says, has made Donald Muller quite "heartbroken"—a complicated notion, since Father Flynn may have been a kind mentor, or he may have been a manipulative abuser. However, Sister Aloysius doesn't show any sense of regret for separating Father Flynn from Donald, since she's convinced that this is ultimately in the boy's best interest, even if he doesn't recognize that right now. If she is indeed right about Flynn, her previous statement that protecting children is often a "thankless" task would be correct.



Although Sister Aloysius succeeded in separating Father Flynn from Donald Muller and believes wholeheartedly that he's guilty, the fact remains that she has no definitive proof, and so she's unable to truly hold him accountable for his alleged actions. This is because he used his power to appeal to the bishop, ultimately securing a promotion instead of having to face any consequences for the abuse Sister Aloysius accused him of. In spite of all this, Sister Aloysius remains confident that it is her moral responsibility to do what she did, even if this means leading a difficult life.



When Sister Aloysius says that "one steps away from God" in the "pursuit of wrongdoing," she suggests that sometimes a person has to commit smaller sins in order to counteract more significant injustices. This, it seems, is why Sister James finds it so difficult to adopt Aloysius's worldview, which makes it hard for a person to maintain "peace of mind." And though Sister Aloysius has strong convictions regarding right and wrong, she suddenly feels an overwhelming sense of doubt. This doubt, though, has nothing to do with whether or not she should have protected Donald Muller. Rather, the entire situation has caused her to doubt the morality of the Catholic Church, an institution to which she has devoted her entire life.





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