

UNVEILING THE SYMBOLIC: LITERATURE AND CINEMA IN JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY'S DRAMATURGY

DES VENDANDO O SIMBÓLICO: LITERATURA E CINEMA NA DRAMATURGIA
DE JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY

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DRAMATURGÍA DE JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY

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ABSTRACT: John Patrick Shanley's play *Doubt - a Parable* (2005) revisits the world he knew as a child, which is the Bronx of the 1960s. The story centers upon a Catholic Irish-Italian school community, and the plot relates to a doubt – that grows into belief, and ends up as certainty – on the part of Sister Aloysius, the principal of the school, who is convinced that Father Flynn, the vicar, has been harassing the only Black student in the school. In this paper, I examine the strategies used by Shanley to keep the possibility of interpretation open as he translates his own work into different media, on the page, on the stage and on the screen.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary American Drama; American Literature; Imagery Studies; *Doubt, a Parable*.

RESUMO: A peça *Dúvida, uma Parábola* (2005) de John Patrick Shanley revisita o mundo que ele conheceu quando criança – o bairro do Bronx dos anos 1960. A história se desenrola em uma comunidade escolar católica ítalo-irlandesa e o enredo diz respeito a uma dúvida – que se transforma em crença – por parte de uma das personagens, Irmã Aloysius, a diretora da escola. Ela acredita que o Padre Flynn esteja molestado sexualmente o único aluno negro da escola. Neste artigo examino as estratégias utilizadas por Shanley para manter a possibilidade de interpretação aberta quando ele traduz sua obra para mídias diferentes – na página, no palco e no cinema.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Teatro Americano Contemporâneo; Literatura Americana; Estudos do Imaginário; *Dúvida, uma Parábola*.

RESUMEN: *Duda, una Parábola* (2005) de John Patrick Shanley retoma el mundo que conoció de niño: el vecindario del Bronx en la década de 1960. La historia se desarrolla en una comunidad escolar católica italiano-irlandesa y la trama se refiere a una duda - lo que se

convierte en creencia - por uno de los personajes, la hermana Aloysius, la directora de la escuela. Ella cree que el padre Flynn está abusando sexualmente del único estudiante negro en la escuela. En este artículo examino las estrategias de Shanley para mantener una interpretación abierta cuando traduce su trabajo a diferentes medios: en la página, en el escenario y en las películas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Teatro Americano Contemporáneo; Literatura americana; Estudios del imaginario; *Duda, una Parábola*

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary American drama offers a rich panorama of present-day life in the United States, inviting the reader/audience to consider and discuss present-day themes as racism, AIDS, economic crises, and the process of adaptation involved in the mixing of foreign cultures in the American melting-pot. Current playwrights, such as John Guare, Tony Kushner, Emily Mann or John Patrick Shanley have stretched the limits of authorship. Not only do they write their plays, but also put them on stage as directors and/or producers when the plays are put on stage. If the work is translated into the movie media, the authors often write the screenplay, direct the movies, are responsible for the production, for the casting, sometimes they even work as actors as well.

In 1967, Alan S. Downer, Chairman of the Department of English at Princeton University, stated that theater would survive and prosper in the future. However, he could not envision in what precise way. He trusted that American drama would always remain “a popular art, reflecting the nation and its experience” (DOWNER, 1967, p. 213). He also stated that any kind of speculation about the future of American drama would be innocuous; it would all depend on the movements of American culture and history. Downey also refers to the difference between the two aspects of a play, on the page, and on the stage, and the different elements that affect the reader and the audience,

But the literature of the theater, the permanent shelf of dramatic classics, has always been much smaller than the repertory of the

theater, the plays which draw and hold audiences night after night. It is not just in America that audiences are drawn more to performances than to play texts; it is the player who attracts our first allegiance. And it is certainly true that in recent decades those American players who have been most attractive – the most enfolding personalities, the most skilled craftsmen – have found their vehicles in the musical play and comedies of sex and domesticity. (Downer, 1967, p. 220).

Downer is right when he considers the different elements that may account for the success or popularity in drama, musicals and comedies, especially if we consider the peculiarities of the American taste. Because of the American tradition of movie-making, the importance of the role of the actor also acquired a totally new dimension. In this sense, Downer is also right when, speaking from the 1960s, he acknowledges he cannot foresee to what extent the art of playwriting would develop in the next decades. One of the features that acquired new dimensions relates to the role of the actor as an integrative part of the creative process. Considering the strong movement of the researches of different acting techniques – that can be traced back to the famous method of Constantin Stanislavski, and then the theories of Meyerhold, Michael Chekhov and Jerzi Grotowski, until the methods of Eugenio Barba, and Peter Brook, the artist related to theater has a huge branch of aesthetical options when they lend their talent and their bodies to enhance the discussion of the social issues present in the culture reflected in the play they represent.

Taking all these facts into consideration, we can state that the contemporary American Theater is the result of a mix of different postures and ideologies. On the one hand we have the beauty and lushness of Broadway productions. On the other hand, we have the experimental, more intellectualized productions of Off-Broadway and Off-off Broadway that have revealed important names in contemporary American dramaturgy, such as John Guare and John Patrick Shanley, and is also engaged in academic research aiming at devising new possibilities of American stage performance. The

profusion of new ideas coming from playwrights, actors, directors and producers is the reason why the American stage remains one of the richest in the world, because of this self-reflexive characteristic that keeps it re-inventing itself constantly.

This is the context in which the playwright who stands at the center of this paper is inserted. John Patrick Shanley has written more, who has written more than 20 plays among which is *Doubt, a Parable*. In this paper, I will analyze how he deals with the concept of doubt in his play and what symbolical patterns can be highlighted in order to provide an interpretation of both the play and the movie adaptation. The analysis of symbolical patterns will rely on the Studies of the Imaginary¹⁴³¹⁴⁴, especially on Gilbert Durand's studies about symbols and archetypes. Not only Shanley, but many of his contemporary colleagues, are concerned with bringing social issues to the stage, and creating works that provoke controversial debates and trigger philosophical questions. Shanley's texts bring into discussion issues such as racial segregation, loneliness in the big metropolis, and difficult personal relationships. Above all, he talks about life in the Bronx – the neighborhood where he was born and in which he grew up.

When John Patrick Shanley devised *Doubt – a Parable*, he got engaged in writing a play about the world he knew in the 1964 Bronx – his own birthplace. At that time, he was a boy from an Irish family living in a Catholic community

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¹⁴⁴ The line of the Studies of the Imaginary investigates images that reverberate in all ages and that are bound to the theory of symbols and archetypes by Carl Gustav Jung. These studies have risen especially in France and are carried out in philosophy by Gaston Bachelard's Hermeneutics of the Imaginary, in anthropology by Gilbert Durand, and in Comparative Mythology by Mircea Eliade and by the American scholar Joseph Campbell. It is also important to highlight the importance of the studies developed by Northrop Frye, who has approximated these questions to Literature. In Brazil, we have three representative names of the field in Ana Maria Lisboa de Mello, Castor Bartolomé Ruiz and Maria Zaíra Turchi. More than a review of this studies, however, the present paper aims to use them to analyze the symbolic aspects of the work.

that had its parish divided between Irish and Italian families. This scenery has played a very important role in his plays. As one can notice, the Bronx is very recurrent in Shanley's works, for example in *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* (1983), *Welcome to the Moon* (1982) and *Italian American Reconciliation* (1986). In these plays, we find reflexes of Shanley's childhood's neighborhood, through characters that represent the kind of people the author used to observe when he lived there.

Doubt – a parable is not different from his other plays in this respect. The story is set in a Bronx Catholic community with its center at St Nicholas church and school - formed basically by Irish and Italian students. The principal of the school, Sister Aloysius, is both a nun and the head of the school. The other characters are Sister James, a nun and a teacher of St Nicholas school, Father Flynn, the priest responsible by St Nicholas parish, and Mrs. Muller, the mother of the only African – American student in the place – Donald Miller. In this setting, several dramatic tensions are articulated. They involve as varied thematic lines as relations of power, sexuality, gender, color, morality and ethics. Despite the setting, however, Shanley says¹⁴⁵ that it is not a play about Catholicism, Sisters of Charity or a discussion on religious beliefs or racial segregation. The author sees this work as a play about doubt.

The plot develops around Sister Aloysius's suspicion, which grows into persuasion and certainty, that Father Flynn is molesting Donald Miller, the Black Student. She is struck by that notion after Sister James – Donald's teacher – comments that Donald came to class from the church seeming frightened and with the smell of alcohol in his breath. Donald does that after a private meeting he had with Father Flynn. This is the central conflict in the play and can be interpreted by the reader or spectator in different ways, depending on the point of view (s)he sides with. To Sister Aloysius, this is a case of pedophilia; Father

¹⁴⁵ SHANLEY, 2005, p.8

Flynn denies the accusation and states his point; Sister James is pressed between two strong persuasive argumentations. The play unfolds as a series of dialogues, punctuated by three monologues – two of them sermons delivered by Father Flynn to his congregation on the subjects of doubt and gossip. These sermons are self-revealing and can even be taken as self-incriminating.

Whenever the play is staged, the subtlety involving the innuendoes of what might or might not have happened in the church depend on the lines of action taken by the director and on the interpretation of the actors. In each new production these ingredients will integrate in a different way. This is why, in the next section, I will not plunge deeply into the possibilities of the play on the stage, but will rather concentrate the comparative comments on the relations involving the text of the play and the screenplay written by Shanley to the movie *Doubt* (2008). The choices that show in the interpretations provided by Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman to sustain the tension evoked by Shanley's play will also be contemplated.

2. DOUBT ON THE PAGE AND ON THE SCREEN

The process of adapting art from one language into another involves making choices. As I write this paper from the point of view of Literary Studies, I understand the choices made by Shanley in the process of adapting his play to the cinema as a translation – an intersemiotic translation that is a reading provided by the playwright himself. Therefore, attention is concentrated on the choices made by the translator, which reveal a lot about his perception of the play as a reader. So, the focus here is the analysis of Shanley's (the translator) reading of Shanley's (the playwright) play. Such choices can be revealed in two forms, from the screenplay to the movie, and in the movie itself, if we consider the influence of the director over the casting process, the performance of the actors, the use of the cameras, sound, color, and everything else. As a screen

player and director Shanley reads Shanley, and needs to reconsider the effects to be achieved, what should be changed and what should remain

The entire project depends on the new reading the artist provides from the original construct that is being adapted. From my perspective, the choice for the open-ending, and to open the possibility for either of the two solutions, remains. Nonetheless, new elements are added that twist the flow of interpretation here and there. The strategies to get the same result by using different means are also worth commenting.

In his path adapting *Doubt, a Parable* to the big screen Shanley had to make different choices. As a playwright, John Patrick Shanley uses words and counts on the black fonts written on white paper and on the imagination of his reader to build a world out of that. The possibilities of construction are as numberless as the readers that read the pages. In the movie we can also count on the imagination of the readers, but instead of being led by words, they are led by images, sounds, and by the focus of the camera. The room for the imagination of the audience to roam is smaller. When reading from the page, the reader must submit to the words selected by the author. When watching the movie, the audience submits to several other previous readings, from the screenplay writer, the director, the actor who says the line, etc.

Concerning the thematic line about doubt, although the effect may be similar, there is a different balance of choices in the movie. In my particular view, I left the cinema more inclined to accept Father Flynn's guilt than when I read the play. But then this might have happened because watching the film was not my first "reading" of the play. In a movie so dependent on subtlety as *Doubt*, the casting makes all the difference. The choice of Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman is seminal. Both are referred to as "an actor's actor", an expression meaning that they are so good that other actors research on samples of their performances when they are studying to play a part. Another relevant peculiarity of these two actors is that each of them has interpreted

intermittently the roles of hero/heroine and villain in many movies, so that this will not interfere in the reception of the audience, who would otherwise pre-define who is to be right and who is to be wrong.

It is not any director who can count on Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman to star their movie. This deed was achieved because of Shanley's reputation not only as a prized playwright, but also as a screenplay-writer, director and producer. The success of *Doubt, a Parable* on Broadway and on the Off-Broadway may have influenced the actors to accept, too, and the quality of the roles. We can even consider that immensely famous actors tend to alternate very popular roles with more intellectualized and sophisticated parts, so as to avoid being too closely associated to a certain role. Meryl Streep accepted the role of Sister Aloysius when the movie *Mamma Mia!* was being released. The drastic difference between characters in the two productions is something very stirring in the career of a great actress. Also, when the actors are very competent and experienced, they usually exchange opinions with the director, to the effect of changing the scenes that were previously conceived.

Although in the play we have only four characters (Sister Aloysius, Father Flynn, Sister James and Mrs. Muller), and three settings, the movie adaptation introduces several additional scenes, and characters, which somewhat alters our perception of things. The more our attention is involved with the new added material, the less we concentrate on the four original characters. Each thing added or removed makes us think of the decisions made by the director, so that we consider Shanley as reader of himself. In my reading of Shanley's reading of the play, I suggest that Shanley stresses a bit further the elements that point to the possibility of guilt on the part of Father Flynn. My basis for this statement lies in some symbolical patterns. I've chosen ten scenes to illustrate my argument which I will show in the next section.

3. UNVEILING THE SYMBOLIC

In this section I will provide an analysis of ten chosen scenes from the movie *Doubt* in order to highlight my argument that Shanley's adaptation/translation from one media (literature) to the other (cinema) weakened the subtlety of doubt itself – the main issue in the play. The first one takes place in one of the first parts of the movie and involves camera movements:

HIGH ANGLE MASTER SHOT OF CONGREGATION FROM BACK OF CHURCH

FLYNN: How much worse is it then for the lone man, the lone woman, stricken by a private calamity?

LOW DUTCH ANGLE: A single of a PALE WOMAN.

FLYNN: 'No one knows I'm sick.'

LOW DUTCH ANGLE: A single of a STOUT OLDER MAN.

FLYNN: 'No one knows I've lost my last real friend.'

BACK TO FLYNN

FLYNN: "No one knows I've done something wrong." (DOUBT, 2008, p. 7)

When we are reading the sermon, we create the images. When we are watching the play, it is possible to direct our eyes in the direction we choose and select what we will focus on. However, in the cinematic language, the camera makes this choice for us. The pace, the expression on the faces of the pale woman and the stout older man, will add to the significance of the sermon, in my opinion to the effect of suggesting that Father Flynn has done something wrong. When the camera moves to a pale woman as he says, "No one knows I'm sick", we suppose she is sick, because the look and the acting of the actress stresses the statement. The same happens when the camera focuses on the stout older man, as Father Flynn says, "No one knows I've lost my last real friend", and the man reacts as if he has lost his last real friend. But the camera closes in on Father Flynn when the priest says, or in this context confesses, "No one

knows I've done something wrong". The choices for the focus of the camera can be considered an interpretation, and such interpretation is not made arbitrarily. This is a choice of the screen player and the director, who in this case are both the same person, Shanley, who opens the movie inviting the audience to suspect that priest.

The second selected scene starts with Sister Aloysius talking to the nuns during lunch and asking them to be attentive about some issues at St. Nicholas Church and School. This is the same conversation she has with Sister James in the play. Here the scene gains more characters, and a different setting. The screenplay goes: "Father Flynn walks in. He looks up at the stained-glass eye." (DOUBT, p. 18). A glass eye, surrounded by solar light, as shown in the movie, certainly is not there without rhyme or reason. On a symbolical level, the image of the eye is strongly connected to the symbolism of Light and the Sun. It may represent the spiritual vision and is also a mirror of the soul. When an eye is surrounded by sunlight it represents God himself, signifying omniscience (HERDER LEXIKON, 1990, p.148). So, the audience may be invited to interpret that Father Flynn is being watched by superior metaphysical powers, or at least he may think he is. He looks at this solar eye, or is being looked by it, through the banister sticks, to the effect that it seems he is looking at the eye through jail bars. The fact that the movie version presents such a powerful symbolical scene indicates that Father Flynn may carry a burden in his conscience.

The tone of the movie is different from the tone of the play. We have more doubts in the play. There are reasons for that. I believe that if we had the conditions to compare the productions of the play *Doubt, a Parable*, held on Broadway and on Off-Broadway we would feel the differences there as well. Each different environment presupposes a different kind of audience, different demands and expectations, and must adapt to that. As a contemporary author, in a time of capitalism and consumerism, besides being an artist Shanley must be pragmatic. A movie from Universal Pictures made at a cost of twenty million

dollars and meant to run for the Academy Award should not meddle too much with the anxiety of the audience, as it seems.

The third scene to be considered has been especially created for the film. It concerns the nose bleeding of William London. In the play, as William London does not have a physical presence as a character, we do not know if what Sister Aloysius says is really true or if it has to do with her opinion about the boy. The movie turns doubt into something explicit, because we see the smart smile in William's face, just as he is leaving school and lighting a cigarette. This predisposes the audience to accept Sister Aloysius's judgments on people as correct, and see her as an experienced woman, who has already performed different roles in her life – she has been a wife, a teacher and a nun. As to whether she has ever been a mother or not, that remains an open question to the end.

The fourth instance analyzed shows the contrast between the atmospheres in which the priests and the nuns have their meals, and the kind of relationship they bear to one another.

INT. THE RECTORY - THREE PRIESTS HAVING DINNER - NIGHT

The Monsignor, FATHER SHERMAN, and Flynn are eating a roast and washing it down with red wine. Boisterous laughter. The Monsignor is smoking a cigarette. The pack is on the table. Pall Mall unfiltered.

FLYNN: The climpity-clomp. Clomp clomp clomp. Harder than a herd of elephants.

MONSIGNOR: You are wicked!

FLYNN: No, I told her, "You're her mother! You raised her, you fed her, YOU tell her she's fat!"

MONSIGNOR: Oh!

FATHER SHERMAN: But wait, how fat is she?

FLYNN: What, the mother or the daughter?

FATHER SHERMAN: The daughter.

FLYNN: I never met the daughter.

FATHER SHERMAN: What about the mother?

FLYNN: Fat!!!

INT. THE CONVENT DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Dinner's in progress. The Nuns eat. Silence. (DOUBT, 2008, p. 26)

Adding to the contrast between the two scenes, and between the effusive (and almost disrespectful) dialogue about the fat lady, we have the disposition of the colors and the contrast among them. The priests are in a dark red room that is not well illuminated. There is this dark tone in the setting. They are drinking (red) wine and eating a portion of meat that is almost raw in a way that would first remind us rather of a throng of barbarians than of holy men ingesting substances that are akin to the blood and body of Christ. The meat is red and there are drops of blood dripping from it. The scene evokes several symbolical patterns that directly affect the imaginary of the audience. The color red, and the dark shade of the room evoke images that are associated rather to the Devil than with godly men. Red is the color of sexual love, passion, heat, fire and hatred. It is also a color of impurity, because it is related to carnal love and to decadence - no wonder the prostitution neighborhoods around the world are known as "red-light" districts (HERDER LEXIKON, 1990, p.204). The choice to highlight the dark red aspect of this masculine environment does not exist in the play.

The drops of blood and the raw meat being eaten by the priests reinforce the archetype of the vampire, the evil creature who feeds from blood. One of the priests is smoking, and Father Flynn also smokes in his scene with Sister James in the garden. Cigarettes remind us more of lay life than of holy priests, they could be seen as another mark of the sensualist – as the nails and the sugar are. Father Flynn eats and drinks the wine and the red blood of the meat while laughing and telling improper jokes about one of his parishioners. In contrast, we have the sequential scene of the Sisters of Charity having lunch. They are in a very different disposition, all around the table, eating quietly in a very

dissimilar environment. The room is white, very well illuminated, and they are drinking milk. The scene is clean and silent. White stands for purity and perfection. Christianity has adopted white as a symbol for virginity, purity and the divine. This is one of the reasons why priests wear white habits. It is also the color of transfiguration, wisdom and innocence. In Western tradition, there is a contrast between the colors white and red, white symbolizing feminine and purity, and red being the color of male and carnal passion (HERDER LEXIKON, 1990, p.38). The disposition of these two scenes delivers a message to the audience.

The fifth scene consists only of actions, with no dialogues. Sister James is watching the dance class, enjoying it, seeing her students dancing and having fun. Then, Shanley describes this additional scene,

SISTER JAMES IS SITTING ON A FOLDING CHAIR WATCHING

Amused. She claps lightly. Then she sees something.

SISTER JAMES' POV - SOME LOCKERS - FLYNN APPEARS

He is somewhat furtive. He has something white in his hand. He opens a locker and puts the white thing in. It's fabric. He sees Sister James and smiles. He takes a sip of water from the drinking fountain and goes back upstairs.

SISTER JAMES SLOWLY WALKING TOWARDS THE LOCKERS

She goes to the locker. She opens it, a boy's white T-shirt. She returns it to the locker puzzled. (DOUBT, 2008, p. 29)

Sister James finds, in the movie version, Donald Muller's t-shirt in the locker she opens. This is a piece of information she will never tell Sister Aloysius during the rest of the filmic narrative. However, she is puzzled now. In the cinematic version, Sister James receives additional information to help her in her judgment of the priest's behavior. We do not know the reason that motivates her not to tell Sister Aloysius about this fact, but his credibility is already shaken, and she cannot trust Father Flynn with the same disposition as

before. Another relevant thing is the color of Donald's t-shirt. It is a white t-shirt, as if representing that the innocence and purity of the boy are now in the hands of Father Flynn.

A sixth important element to consider is the physical presence of Donald Muller in the movie. He is not an imaginary abstract entity anymore. Here he appears as an actor (Joseph Foster II) performing and we can see him, with his sad eyes, and his sorrow about being bullied by his classmates, and by his father. We can witness the way his eyes shine when he is with his fellow Father Flynn and feel that the boy loves this priest. We just do not know in what ways. There is a scene in which he throws a jealous look at Father Flynn when the priest is talking to another boy, Jimmy, asking if he wants to practice after school. Different spectators will interpret this scene, and the boy's needs, in different ways. No matter the approach, however, one thing is clear: that boy is glad to count on the support of that adult. Whether as a protector, a father figure, a mentor, a teacher, or for sexual reasons, or for a number of those reasons it is for each viewer to decide.

On a practical level, however, neither Sister Aloysius nor Sister James have any proof to accuse Father Flynn. Sister Aloysius is only equipped with her own certainty. So, she devises a strategy to beat the system, in order to achieve her goals. To underline this chase performed by Sister Aloysius, the movie introduces another additional scene, the seventh we will examine.

Mrs. Carson, the housekeeper of the nun's house, brings a female cat because she notices there is a mouse in the house. Since male and female cats are equally efficient in mouse-chasing, the mention to the gender of the cat as being a female invites us to associate the cat with Sister Aloysius (who is also chasing someone), and therefore the mouse stands for Father Flynn. After catching the mouse, Mrs. Carson says that we need a cat to get a mouse. Sister Aloysius agrees with the statement. It is interesting to notice, again, how the

characters are approximated and put apart from the divine through symbols. Like in the sequence of scenes in the dark red and white rooms. The cat is an animal bound to the divine since Ancient Egypt, even before that; whereas the mouse is an image vastly used to defame the morality of a character. The rat is an animal associated with the Black Death, which destroyed one third of the population of Europe during the Middle Ages, and which (probably as a consequence to that) provokes instinctive disgust and repugnance in humans. Rats move swiftly and surreptitiously, and live in the trash. They eat from the trash and can spread diseases. In the European imaginary, they relate to evil figures as the witch, the vampire, the Devil and leprechauns (HERDER LEXIKON, 1990, p.171). Cats, conversely, are independent, agile and sharply skilled. Still, despite their association with divinity, they seem to refer to pre-Christian lines of religiosity. The more dichotomist our tradition became, the more the image of the cat was associated with the dangerous, devilish aspects of femininity. In this sense, Sister Aloysius reminds us very much of a cat when she decides that she will do what she must do even if, in order to achieve that, she must step away from God. She seems to be answering to a primitive sort of feminine, motherly, sacred summon there, in which the rescuing of one single child seems to be worth more than two thousand years of institutional canons and dogmas.

The eighth instance to observe concerns, again, the relation of the two antagonists to light and shadow. During the first confrontation of Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn, in her office, there is an appealing symbolical sequence. When Father Flynn suggests a secular song and a dance with one of the boys, Sister Aloysius asks him which boy he has in mind. As she does that, she flips the blinds, letting the sunshine fall on the priest. It is clear that the light annoys Father Flynn, because one of his next moves is to close the window again. The same thing happens when Sister Aloysius turns on a lamp, and he sequentially turns off the same lamp. His aversion to light can be interpreted as one more symptom of the presence of the archetype of the vampire. Moreover, applied to

this particular scene, light can be interpreted as a symbol of knowledge, enlightenment, or even the Truth, with capital letters, that Sister Aloysius is chasing. As she wants to reach the truth about Donald Muller, Sister Aloysius opens the window and turns on the lamp, as in an attempt to clarify, to elucidate the situation. She needs everything to get clear, even because she needs to feel justified in her radical actions. On the one hand, the light annoys Father Flynn; he is not comfortable with it.

In the ninth confrontation, Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius are arguing again at the principal's office. Father Flynn is irate as he bursts into her office, shouting at Sister Aloysius and demanding that she stops her campaign against him. In the play, this is the scene in which Sister Aloysius attests she may even leave the Church, if necessary, to reach her goal. In the movie, the scene is visually directed as follows:

FLYNN: You haven't the slightest proof of anything.

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'll find a parent. Trust me, Father Flynn, I will.

FLYNN: You have no right to act on your own! You have taken vows, obedience being one! You answer to us! You have no right to step outside the church!

SISTER ALOYSIUS: I will step outside the church if that's what needs to be done, till the door should shut behind me! I will do what needs to be done, though I'm damned to Hell!

[During last, she brandished rosary and then slammed it down.]

SISTER ALOYSIUS: You should understand that, or you will mistake me. Now, did you give Donald Muller wine to drink?

FLYNN: Have you never done anything wrong?

SISTER ALOYSIUS: I have.

FLYNN: A mortal sin?

SISTER ALOYSIUS: Yes.

FLYNN: And?

SISTER ALOYSIUS: I confessed it, Father!

FLYNN: Then whatever I have done, I have left in the healing hands of my confessor. As have you! We are the same!

SISTER ALOYSIUS: No, we are not, we are not the same! (DOUBT, 2008, p. 86)

The two redirecting forces in this version of the scene come from the direction on the screenplay about the brandishing and tossing of the rosary, and the use made by Meryl Streep of her voice and body expression, especially in the lines when she confesses that she has done something wrong as well. The choice of the actress changes the mood of the scene completely. At this point we see a fragile and humanized Sister Aloysius, who knows about the sorrows and vicissitudes of life. This happens soon after she has showed her warlike disposition, when she says she will step outside the Church if that is what needs to be done. Sister Aloysius raises her crucifix as if she is holding a sword, as if she is in the battlefield. As she does that, she is invested with the archetype of the warrior maiden. This prospect underlines the growing of the character with her superior intentions of protecting the boy that elevate her to a level of paladin to humanization and justice. She is also the old and wise woman who knows what must be done, and is willing to pay the price, dissolving doubts within the certainty of her beliefs.

The tenth and last scene in our discussion, which also happens to be the last scene in the movie, takes place in the garden, covered by snow, reminding us of Gilbert Durand's remark about the visual utility of the snow in literature: adding to the color white and to all the imagery connected with water and with the feminine, it highlights what is relevant and covers up the rest (DURAND, 1996, p.42). The setting reminds us of the conversation about the frost, in the beginning of the story, when Sister Aloysius says that when the frost comes, it is too late to do anything. Now some time has elapsed, frost has come and gone, and snow has settled down. Regardless of whether she has been right or wrong,

Sister Aloysius's actions have – for better or for worse – separated Father Flynn from her boys.

Here, we have the final conversation between Sister Aloysius and Sister James, when Sister Aloysius bursts into tears, acknowledging she is in doubt. Doubt is the major feature in the movie. The white scenario helps to bring into light what was evident throughout – that this is an unsolved story. The fact that the movie results as ambiguous as the play indicates that the transposition from one media to the other has been successful, although the ambiguity Shanley reached in the play is weakened. From my perspective, Shanley's reading of his work indicates that – as a reader – he ultimately sides with Sister Aloysius.

4. CONCLUSION

The main question posed by the play and the movie is whether or not Father Flynn molested Donald Muller. Did the boy drink from the altar wine? Is Donald being beaten by his father? Questions like these, in real life, could be solved through medical examination and evidences would be gathered. In fictional life, however, we would depend on the revealing words that were not uttered by the characters; or in the movements of the camera and facial expressions that were not made by the actors. The fictional choice was to leave the matter open. As there is no final answer granted by the play, the solving of the doubt depends on each reader/spectator, and it is never final. As the play/movie is revisited by the same person, the reactions might be different, depending on several different circumstances. There are many layers of subtlety to this story. As an example, let us consider the wine issue. A child drinking wine is a serious matter to the American culture. A child being offered wine by an adult is more serious yet. More than wine, that is altar wine, dogmatically a sacred substance (to the Catholic Church the very blood of Christ) that can only be handled by an invested priest. We also have the echoes

of Donald's fragile condition. He is Black, poor, effeminate, and inserted in a social context where each of these characteristics made an outsider out of him. Donald's mother, arguably the only person he can really trust, is engaged in finding a way so that her husband does not kill Donald. We never meet Donald's father, but we can consider him a violent man if we take into consideration Mrs. Muller's words, "you don't tell my husband what to do. You just stand back." (SHANLEY, 2005, p. 44)

Then, there are the matters of racial segregation and the ethnical division of New York. The Bronx of the Sixties is a harsh territory for Black children who had to deal with the racism of the descendants of Italian and Irish immigrants. In this scenario, who would help Sister Aloysius defend her point? The boy? The boy's mother? Not even Sister James or the reader are convinced of sister Aloysius's truth. We cannot identify to what extent she is a humanitarian or to what extent she is a political militant arguing about power issues, or to what extent Father Flynn shocks her because they hold different opinions about the role of the Church in the contemporary world.

There is then a second kind of doubt, even more difficult to answer, and we can address it through Sister Aloysius. When we scan the play, for the first time, we see that Sister Aloysius uses the word certainty. Sister Aloysius belongs to the old school, she believes in not taking risks. If her function is to protect the children, and there is reasonable ground for doubt, she would rather turn doubt into certainty and act as to guard her flock. In case she is wrong, it is a pity that she may cause harm to the reputation of a decent man. In case she is right, she is saving a helpless child from being abused. Ultimately, there is a risk to each of these situations.

Sister Aloysius is convinced that Father Flynn is the kind of priest who allures young boys into inappropriate acts. What is the basis to her certainty? Is she as certain as she claims? If one takes to her lines, it is easy to notice that she

professes a great skepticism about human nature and its “fraudulent customs”. She believes in the value of authority and tradition and defends that teachers should be more feared than loved. Her thoughts towards the Church go in the same direction. Sister Aloysius believes that the Church must be different and claims that even the parishioners expect that from them. This position concerns both the role of the priest in the Church and the role of the teacher in the School. Father Flynn represents all the dangers Sister Aloysius sees in this Post-Vatican II Church¹⁴⁶. Considering her opinion of the Monsignor, she does not seem to believe in the competence of men as administrators either. Sister Aloysius even insinuates that Father Flynn could have an understanding with his previous pastor, in his old parish. This entire conduct shows how discredited the Catholic Institution is for this nun.

Sister Aloysius overlooks the Church protocol as she proceeds into her investigation. The more she discredits the men who are in charge of the parish and is certain they will not do anything about the matter, the more Sister Aloysius clings to her “certainty” about Father Flynn’s behavior. She seems to mistrust humans in general, and the males in particular. She doubts the integrity of the clergy, especially of these two men. It is paradoxical – and yet revealing – that the character who shows to be the most certain about the facts is ultimately the greatest doubter.

On the other hand, we have the figure of the young and charismatic Father Flynn. We can see he supports the thoughts of the Second Ecumenical Council, and that could candidly also explain his promotion at the end of the play. He professes a strong belief in changing the Church into a more hospitable place for the community. But there is also the possibility that he may take

¹⁴⁶ Second Vatican Council, also called Vatican II, (1962–65), 21st ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church, announced by Pope John XXIII on January 25, 1959, as a means of spiritual renewal for the church and as an occasion for Christians separated from Rome to join in a search for Christian unity (ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA, available on <https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Vatican-Council>)

further pleasure than solidarity as he interacts with the children. This is a matter never solved in the play. But Father Flynn does not seem to carry any heavy doubt, although he is the first one to present the argument in his first sermon at the opening of the play. Father Flynn is not in the play to be a doubter, he is rather the puzzle that triggers all our doubts. He is the one to be considered through different lights. But by whom? Sister James ends the play believing in his innocence, whereas Sister Aloysius remains certain of his guilt, at least until she falters in the final act. Father Flynn is supposed to be doubted by us, readers and viewers, as we progress along the story. We meet him as a pleasing and kind creature, but we also must consider the worries of Sister Aloysius, and the symbolical patterns presented in the plot. We arrive at an *aporia*, a dead-end, where it is hard to judge Father Flynn's guilt or innocence. In the factual world the verdict would go *in dubio pro reo*. In the fictional world, we have an open-ended story.

In the following sequence we find Father Flynn asking for justice,

FLYNN: Are we people? 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. In the spirit of charity, I appeal to you. On behalf of my life's work. You have to behave responsibly. I put myself in your hands. (SHANLEY, 2005 p. 55)

Such words may account for his innocence or culpability. What could be so terrible that makes him beg in the spirit of charity? Why is he not allowed to tell Sister Aloysius all the truth? Does he know more about Donald and Donald's family than we do? Is he bound to secrecy because of a confession he got, or is all that just an easy excuse for him to keep silent? Not even Monsignor Benedict would have the power to force him into breaking the secret of a confession.

Father Flynn also says that, no matter what he might have done, he has already deposited that on the healing hands of his confessor. So, Father Flynn has confessed to something. Perhaps, he has confessed to the Monsignor, and that could be the reason of his transference (and consequent promotion). What might he have confessed? His attraction to the boy? Or that he has developed an aversion to the very sight of his co-worker Sister Aloysius, who keeps fretting him all along? Who is harassing who in this story, after all? There is no answer to that.

Nevertheless, despite the insolvable puzzle, we as readers/viewers impose our interpretation upon the text. According to Gilbert Durand all the senses and objects of human conscience are coordinated by imagination (DURAND, 1983, p.42). When we take into consideration the symbolical patterns of an artistic work as rich as Shanley's is, we invest with meaning not the things that have been said in the play, but in the way they are related to our notion of factual life as well. We can also analyze the text and see in which ways it gets closer to or distant from its translation into the filmic version. In this sense, if we approach literature through the imaginary constructions of a certain time and culture, we will be addressing not only this aesthetic construct, but also the world that gave birth to it and all the symbols that are bound to it.

Shanley, through his title, asks us to consider this play as a parable. This is a legitimate way to face an artistic work about the impossibility of being sure about things. Such parable mimics our own amalgam of uncertainties bringing to discussion established values. Sister James, both in the play and in the movie, underneath her apparent innocence, presents a healthy kind of common-sense. She, along with Donald's mother, Mrs. Muller, can be considered in practical terms important female figures in the life of Donald Muller – the teacher and the mother. The gathering of these three women, Sister James, Mrs. Muller and Sister Aloysius may account for the primeval triple archetype of the ancient Goddess – the maiden, the mother and the old wise woman. Archetypically they

represent, in emotional and intellectual aspects, the three phases of the moon – innocence and purity (Sister James/Crescent Moon), strength and acceptance (Mrs. Muller/ Full Moon), wisdom and perspicacity (Sister Aloysius/Waning Moon). This interpretation would lead into a favorable view of Sister Aloysius. As a consequence, Father Flynn is seen in a negative light, he is the one who seduces innocence (forcing upon the credulity and loyalty of Sister James and Donald Muller), forces acceptance (on the part of Mrs. Muller and his superiors in the Church) and is fought by experience and seniority (in Sister Aloysius).

Literature is formed out of images and symbols. Open-ended works, as *Doubt, a Parable*, are even more open to different readings and interpretations. As the plot relates to the Catholic Church, we must also take into consideration the iconography of that established tradition. Anthropologically, the Church of Rome feeds its imaginary on the religious practices of each of the tribes and reigns that formed the Roman Empire. This is to say that the unclosing of symbols is endless in a play like this. In one layer the final interpretation can lead to Father Flynn's innocence and in the following reading to his guilt.

I am aware that, not only as a reader, but also as a researcher, I am constrained by the limits of my own knowledge. Umberto Eco, in his book *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (ECO, 1994, p.6), provides an interesting metaphor to the hermeneutic relation between the reader and the analyzed piece of literature. He compares the book to a dense forest, and the reader is the adventurer who will make his journey inside the woods. The success of the journey will depend on the things we carry in our backpacks. If we have the necessary tools to go through the woods, we can stay longer, visit unknown places, climb trees, light a fire camp, find new directions. If we do not have the appropriate materials, we can only follow a limited path. We manage to go through the woods, but straight away, without the possibility of finding new wonders.

Following Eco's metaphor of the wood, the discussion carried out in this paper brought out the tools from my backpack. I used them by selecting some symbolical images that I judged important for the understanding of the play – at least my understanding of the play. Other readers, or myself in another stage of my readings, can select other symbols, or the same, and approach them in different ways. That is the wonder of literature, because symbols can unfold into numberless meanings and possibilities, that vary according to the eyes laid on them. Here, lies, for me, the importance of a theatrical work. The multiple layers of readings made by the author, the director, the actor, make complex things even more complex. This suits our time of uncertainties, in our world so full of information. We have access to all kind of news every day, through the newspaper, television, radio or internet. Therefore, things are taken at face value, nothing is important, the processes involving knowledge and even taste need to be redefined. Along with the roles of priests, teachers, and all sorts of professionals. Shanley's play is about that. We live in a culture of doubts, but we are surrounded by information and technological innovations that taste like certainties. A lot of these things change our life for better; others do not. If we consider the plot of Shanley's play, we see the characters as surrounded by pieces of information, like in an intricate puzzle, and they try to put the pieces together.

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