

DISCOVERY GUIDE

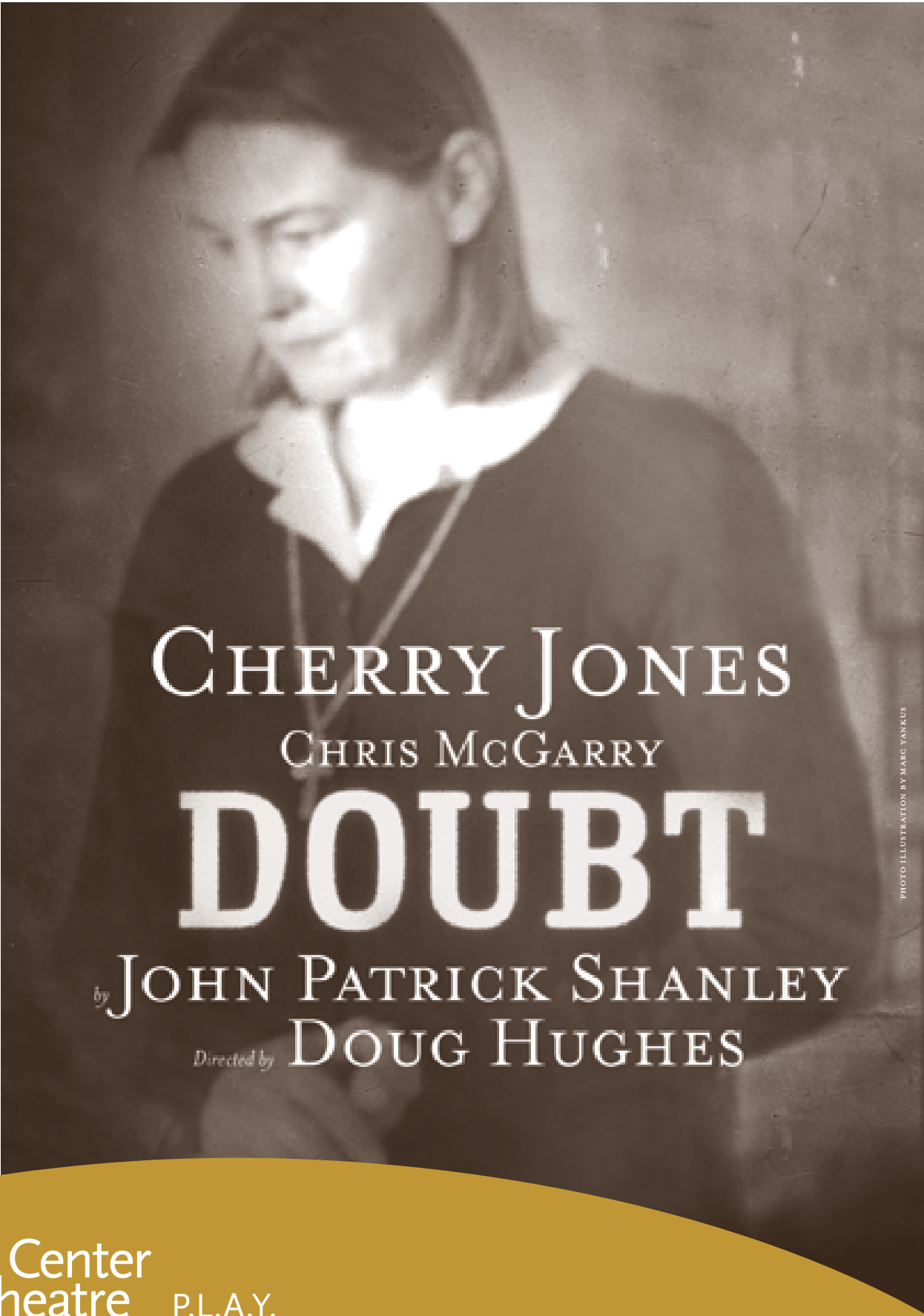


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MARC YANKUS

CHERRY JONES

CHRIS MCGARRY

DOUBT

by JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY

Directed by DOUG HUGHES



Center  
Theatre  
Group

P.L.A.Y.

Performing for Los Angeles Youth

L.A.'s Theatre Company

# How to Use this Discovery Guide



COURTESY OF LAMBERT/ARCHIVE PHOTOS

“**N**want to say to you: *Doubt* can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty.” -FATHER FLYNN in *Doubt*

**THIS DISCOVERY GUIDE** will help you to understand and develop your own interpretation of *Doubt*, a play that asks the question, “What do you really know and how do you know it?” In addition to factual information, the Guide offers several exercises to help you think critically about this challenging play. As the play illustrates, when it comes to **subjective** interpretation, there are no answers that are definitely right or wrong. The exercises are opportunities to think through your own opinions and express them in a **rational** way.

Certain opinions that you hold before you see the play may be different from the ones you have afterward. You may find your impressions changing as you watch the play.

If you feel uncomfortable as you wrestle with the play’s themes, you’re probably on the right track. *Doubt* is an uncomfortable feeling, but as the playwright notes in his foreword to the script, “It is doubt (so often experienced initially as weakness) that changes things. When a man feels unsteady, when he falters, when hard-won knowledge evaporates before his eyes, he’s on the verge of growth.”

## OBJECTIVES OF THIS DISCOVERY GUIDE

This Discovery Guide is designed to help you

- ∞ Understand the complex issues dramatized in the play
- ∞ Sharpen your capacity for critical thinking
- ∞ Become accustomed to **ambiguity** in art and life
- ∞ Consider the historical and cultural context of the play
- ∞ Study how John Patrick Shanley creates drama on stage

Vocabulary words are in **bold** type. Definitions are within each section.

## DISCOVERY JOURNAL CREDITS

ANN ANDERSON, Discovery Guide Writer, was an Adjunct Professor of Theatre at Los Angeles Valley College. In addition to writing for theatre magazines and guides, she is the author of *Snake Oil*, *Hustlers* and *Hambones: The American Medicine Show* (McFarland and Co., 2000). She taught acting at the Performing Arts Center in Van Nuys and at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Hollywood. She currently lives in Boulder, Colorado, where she works as a freelance writer.

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“**L**et me ask you. Have you ever held a position in an argument past the point of comfort? Have you ever defended a way of life you were on the verge of exhausting? Have you ever given service to a creed you no longer utterly believed? Have you ever told a girl you loved her and felt the faint nausea of eroding conviction? I have.

-JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY, preface to *Doubt*

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PHOTO PROVIDED BY STOCK MONTAGE

# Synopsis of *Doubt*



Many nuns are also teachers (ARCHIVE PHOTOS)

“**I**f a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts he shall end in certainties.” —FRANCIS BACON, 1561-1626

**DOUBT IS A PARABLE**, which means it's a very simple story that has an underlying lesson. The story is about Sister Aloysius, a Catholic school principal, who suspects on the basis of **inference**, not hard evidence, that Father Flynn, the resident priest, has been behaving inappropriately with a student. She recruits one of the teachers, Sister James, to keep an eye on Father Flynn. Sister Aloysius is adamant that he must be removed from her campus and their parish, but is her conviction justified?

As you can see, the plot, or story line, of *Doubt* is very simple. This is a parable, but what is the lesson? The playwright has written a deliberately open-ended parable, in which the lesson to be learned is for you, the audience, to interpret for yourselves. A few of the many questions that the play raises are:

- ☞ What do you really know for sure?
- ☞ By what method do you **ascertain** whether what you believe to be true is actually true?
- ☞ Are you willing to accept the consequences of actions based on beliefs that might be false?
- ☞ How do you tend to see the world—in black and white or in shades of gray?

## VOCABULARY

- Ambiguity:** Uncertainty; lack of clarity
- Ascertain:** To find out or learn with certainty
- Inference:** A conclusion derived from fact or assumption, such as seeing smoke and inferring fire
- Rational:** Based on reason
- Subjective:** Peculiar to a particular individual

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

**JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY** (1950-) was born in the Bronx borough of New York City. His first teachers were the Irish Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Charity. He attended New York University (NYU). Mr. Shanley says that he was expelled from kindergarten, expelled from high school and placed on academic probation by NYU. Then he joined the Marines, where he did just fine. He is still doing fine.

Mr. Shanley has written many plays, including *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* and *Savage in Limbo*. His screenplay for the 1987 film, *Moonstruck*, won the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. He wrote and directed the 1990 film, *Joe Versus the Volcano*, starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan.

In 2005, *Doubt* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the Drama Desk Award and the Tony Award for Best Play. Mr. Shanley is interested in your reactions to his play. You can email him at [Shanleymoney@aol.com](mailto:Shanleymoney@aol.com).

## Looking Beneath the Surface: Subtext

“**T**here’s nothing there except lines of dialogue. If they’re sketched correctly and minimally, they will give the audience the illusion that these are “real people,” especially if the lines are spoken by real people – the actors are going to fill a lot in. So a large part of the technique of playwriting is to leave a lot out.”

—DAVID MAMET, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright

**DO YOU ALWAYS** state exactly what you mean or ask for exactly what you want? Isn’t it true that at certain times we’re direct, and at others we hint at what’s on our minds? Because theatre reflects life, characters in plays behave that way, too.

When actors and directors work on a play, they often discuss the subtext—the meaning beneath the surface meaning of the words on the page. It’s the underlying tension that brings a scene to life. It’s what the characters are really thinking, as opposed to what they may be saying or doing. Sometimes the subtext is the opposite of what a character says.

*Doubt* is a play with very rich subtext. What the characters **imply** and **infer** is as meaningful as the words they say, and in some cases, more so. When you see the play, notice how expert actors such as Cherry Jones bring out the underlying meaning of their dialogue.

Subtext gives actors room to use movement, gesture, facial expression and vocal inflection to fill out the scene. There are successful plays without subtext, but in most good plays what is not said is as important as the actual dialogue. As John Patrick Shanley says in his preface, “What’s under a play? What holds it up? You might as well ask what’s under me? On what am I built? There’s something silent under every person and every play. There is something unsaid under any given society as well.”

### PLAY THE SUBTEXT

**ON SMALL PIECES OF PAPER**, write a clear, direct message such as “Please do the dishes,” or “I really like you.” Swap messages. Think of a subtext or several possible subtexts, and say the line with those underlying thoughts in mind. Use tone of voice, expression and gesture to express your true meaning. Example: “Please do the dishes” could be said to convey, “You don’t respect me,” or alternatively, “I am in charge of you.” Discover how many meanings can be communicated with one simple line of dialogue.



Cherry Jones in *Doubt* (PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS)

### VOCABULARY

**Imply:** To express indirectly  
**Infer:** To reason from circumstance or evidence



# Quid Pro Quo: A Look at Social Contracts



COURTESY OF ROBERT OPIE COLLECTION

**D**oubt requires more courage than conviction does, and more energy; because conviction is a resting place and doubt is infinite—it is a passionate exercise. You may come out of my play uncertain. You may want to be sure. Look down on that feeling. We’ve got to learn to live with a full measure of uncertainty. There is no last word. That’s the silence under the chatter of our time.”  
—JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY, preface to *Doubt*

**PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS** can be viewed from different angles. Theatre provides a way of seeing those connections from various perspectives. One might say that relationships are based on agreements, or contracts. Status, age and gender are some of the factors that influence personal contracts. Social scientists examine these factors all the time, but in a generalized, detached way. Playwrights, on the other hand, often portray the complexity and pitfalls of such contracts in ways that engage us emotionally and specifically by involving us in the characters’ lives. Before you see the play, consider this:

## SOCIAL CONTRACT n.

**Definition 1#:** An agreement among the members of an organized society or between the governed and the government defining and limiting the rights and duties of each  
**Definition 2#:** An **implicit** agreement among people that results in a societal structure in which the individual surrenders liberty in return for protection

Social contract theory is almost as old as human society. Socrates (470-399 BCE) wrote about the individual’s relationship to the state; later the English philosophers Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704) further clarified the rights and responsibilities of people in an organized society. Still later, in France, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) added his thoughts to the discussion, and many contemporary theorists have weighed in as well.

The term “social contract” can be used to discuss citizens and their government, but it can also describe the benefits and obligations of many relationships, such as between parents and children, teachers and students, **clergy** and parishioners.

## Sister, Sister

**THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH** is organized as a **hierarchy**. Power is concentrated at the top point of a pyramid in the person of the Pope, who is the elected spiritual head of the Church and holds that office until his death. The Church structure, which consists of cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests and deacons in that descending order, is paternalistic, meaning that its authority rests with men.

Nuns are **consecrated** women who devote themselves to service, prayer and meditation by joining a religious order. Roman Catholic nuns take vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. They are obedient first to their order’s Mother Superior, and then to their local priest, bishop, and so on up the hierarchy. Nuns exchange a life of service, typically as teachers, nurses or social workers, for a home, community and spiritual fulfillment. In broad terms, that is their contract.

## VOCABULARY

**Clergy:** The group ordained to perform religious rites

**Consecrated:** Dedicated to a sacred purpose

**Hierarchy:** A ruling body organized by rank

**Implicit:** Capable of being understood from something unexpressed

**Laity:** The people of a religious faith who are not part of the clergy

**Quid pro quo:** An exchange of favors; Latin for “this for that”

Technically, nuns are not even part of the clergy; they are a branch of the **laity**, whose function, according to long-standing tradition, is handmaid and helper to the male priesthood. This viewpoint has persisted for centuries, and was not materially affected by Vatican II (see page 8). Priests, who have more authority and status than nuns, administer the sacraments such as baptism, Mass and confession and in turn are expected to meet certain standards of faith, piety and behavior such as celibacy and adherence to Church law. That is their contract.

### REVIEW YOUR CONTRACTS

**DOUBT CONCERNS** a web of relationships that exist owing to implied social contracts. Some ways to describe these relationships are employer/employee, priest/nun, principal/teacher, teacher/student, priest/altar boy, mother/son, mother/principal, older nun/younger nun and so on. As you can see, the relationships can be broken down in a number of ways.

What are the terms of the social contract you have with your family, school or community? Choose one specific relationship in your life, such as that with a sibling, friend, parent, teacher or employer for the following analysis.

Contract with: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Other participants: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your responsibilities/obligations: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your benefits/expectations: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

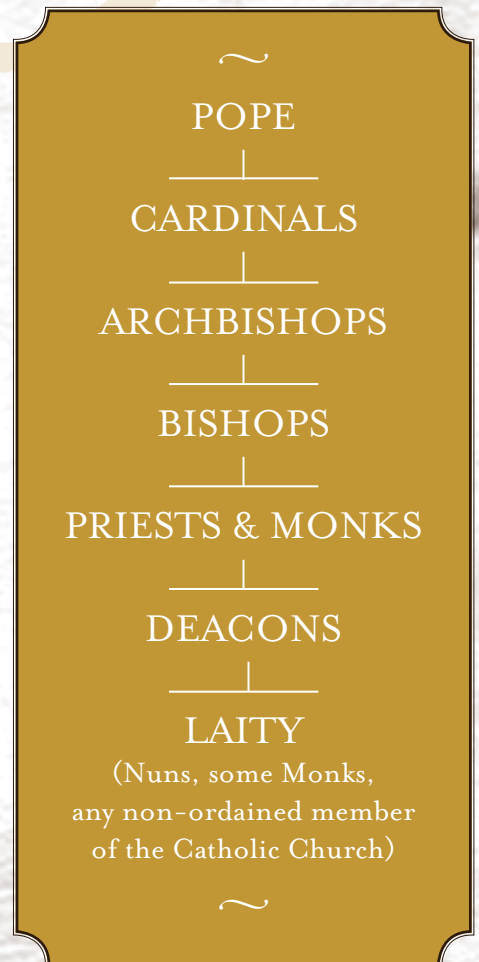
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Is the contract being fulfilled? By you? By the other parties? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_







The Second Vatican Council took place in Rome between 1962 and 1965. (© CATHOLIC SENTINEL, PORTLAND, OREGON)

“ rue science teaches, above all, to doubt and be ignorant.

—MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO, 1864-1936

Although the play makes a clear reference to recent headlines, the playwright made an artistic choice to set the play in 1964, a year known for its dizzying pace of societal change. Here are two key events of that time

### VATICAN II

**IN OCTOBER OF 1962**, Catholic bishops from all over the world met in Vatican City in the heart of Rome to re-define the mission, **tenor** and scope of the Catholic Church. They met every autumn from 1962 until 1965. The series of conferences, known as the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, was intended to be an **ecclesiastical, theological** and **ecumenical** examination of Church practice and doctrine. Pope John XXIII, who first convened Vatican II, spoke of “opening the windows” of the Church. Vatican II effected more changes within the Catholic religion than in any time in the preceding 500 years. Thus *Doubt* takes place during a time of self-examination and change by the Church hierarchy.

Some of the changes that the council made were to include greater use of native languages (as opposed to Latin) in the Mass. After Vatican II, priests faced the congregation instead of standing with their backs to them as they faced the altar. The Jewish people, who were previously blamed by the Church for the death of Jesus, were officially deemed not responsible for that historical crime. The bishops also declared a commonality with people of all faiths, including Protestants. These are but a few of the changes wrought by the council, some of which are controversial to this day. Some Catholics view Vatican II as a “new springtime for the Church,” while others see it as a regrettable turn away from the Church’s core principles.

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**VOCABULARY**

**Ecclesiastical:** Of or related to a church

**Ecumenical:** Worldwide in extent, influence or application

**Tenor:** The general sense of something spoken or written

**Theological:** Related to the teachings of an organized religious community

~

### CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964

**UP UNTIL 1964**, prejudice against minorities, particularly African Americans, was mandated by law in parts of the United States and openly acceptable in others. “Jim Crow” laws in the South set up separate schools, restaurants, theatres, parks, hospitals and other public buildings. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was landmark legislation that did not completely cure the problem, but went a long way in remedying it. It made racially-based job discrimination and segregation of schools and other institutions illegal, and eventually opened many opportunities for men and women of color.

Vatican II gave the Catholic laity a greater voice in their parishes than before. Owing to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, African Americans gained legal entitlement to greater opportunity and protection from discrimination. The year 1964 was notable for dramatic shifts in many areas, which you will research below.



White students protest on the first day of school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas. (PHOTO BY FLIP SCHULKE)





# Re-Visiting Social Contracts



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VOCABULARY

**Breach:** To violate an agreement

**Correlation:** The relationship or connection between two things

~



Freedom of speech and freedom of action are meaningless without freedom to think. And there is no freedom of thought without doubt. —BERGEN EVANS, 1904-1978, *The Natural History of Nonsense*

**HOW DID YOU RESPOND** to the characters in *Doubt*? At the beginning of the play, who was more sympathetic, Sister Aloysius or Father Flynn? As the play progressed, did you find your first impression shifting? This raises another question: What is the **correlation** (if any) between a pleasant personality and trustworthiness?

In the space provided below, describe the social contracts between the following characters in terms of benefits and responsibilities. Do the agreements function as they should? List ways in which the contracts are **breached** or upheld. Be specific.

Sister Aloysius/Father Flynn \_\_\_\_\_

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Sister Aloysius/Mrs. Muller \_\_\_\_\_

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Donald Muller/Mrs. Muller \_\_\_\_\_

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# Parables



Illustration of *The Good Samaritan* by Tomie dePaola



orgotten mornings when he walked  
with his mother

Through the parables of sunlight  
And the legend of the green chapels.

—DYLAN THOMAS, 1914–1953, *Poem in October*

**THE SUBTITLE OF DOUBT IS A PARABLE.** Parables are very simple stories in which a character must face a choice and accept the consequences of that decision. In other words, a parable is a brief, realistic story that illustrates a moral or ethical choice. In some parables, the main character, or protagonist, makes the right choice, and in others, he or she takes the wrong path. Parables are **metaphors**; they make their point indirectly.

Parables are often associated with the major world religions, but can also appear in a **secular context**. The most well-known parables in Western literature are from the New Testament, such as The Parable of the Mustard Seed and The Good Samaritan. However, parables are common to many religious traditions. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and the Hindu faith all have parables that illustrate their respective creeds.

*Doubt* begins with a parable. In the course of a sermon (also called a homily), Father Flynn tells the story of a man who is lost at sea and clinging to the hope that he has set the correct course for home. What happens to the man? Father Flynn doesn't say, and thus, the play begins on a note of doubt.

## WRITE YOUR OWN PARABLE

Think of an event in your own life that caused you to grow, change your mind or doubt what you previously believed. Use this event as the basis for your own parable. (Examples: the moment you knew there was no tooth fairy or that your parents weren't perfect) Begin with a character, a setting and a simple action such as, "A girl walked into a classroom," or "A boy crossed the street" and go from there. Keep the **narrative** and the lesson or new-found wisdom contained within it as simple as possible. (Hint: Don't exceed the space allowed.)

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# Doubtful or Certain?



Many Catholic school days began with a prayer in the classroom. (COURTESY OF FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHERS GUILD)

**THINKING THAT SOMETHING** is so doesn't necessarily make it so. Isn't that the central struggle in *Doubt*? Sister Aloysius says at the end of the play, "I have doubts! I have such doubts!" What exactly does she mean? Why is that admission painful for her?

At times, we all suffer from illusions, which is the state of being intellectually misled. The word "disillusioned," meaning stripped of one's misconceptions, often has a negative connotation, but isn't it better to see things as they really are?

## CHART YOUR THINKING

We know things through direct observation (what we see with our own eyes), hearsay (what we've heard from others), intuition (our own gut feeling), assumption (putting two and two together to form a conclusion) and documentary evidence (information from experts that we accept as accurate). Consider what you know, or what you think you know, about your relationships and ideas. Chart how you came to your conclusions. Make check marks in the appropriate boxes.

What You Know		Observation	Hearsay	Intuition	Assumption	Documentation	Other
Parents							
Siblings							
Celebrities							
The Physical World							
My Body							
Religion							





# Concluding Remarks

**GOOD THEATRE** is often provocative. Some would argue that provocation is a primary function of theatre. Whether you enjoyed *Doubt* or not, if the play incited a lively discussion, then the time was well spent. If *Doubt* caused you to examine your own thought processes, so much the better. We hope that you gained something worthwhile from the play and the use of this Discovery Guide. Please contact us with your comments, suggestions and critiques.

**P.L.A.Y.**  
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## Resources

### WEB SITES

[www.historycentral.com/20th/1964.html](http://www.historycentral.com/20th/1964.html)

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1964](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1964)

[www.infoplease.com/year/1964.html](http://www.infoplease.com/year/1964.html)

[timlines.ws/20thcent/1964.html](http://timlines.ws/20thcent/1964.html)

[www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/9487/caltm64.htm](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/9487/caltm64.htm)

Notable events and achievements of 1964

[vintagecars.about.com/od/greatcars/p/profile\\_64stang.htm](http://vintagecars.about.com/od/greatcars/p/profile_64stang.htm)

About the Ford Mustang, which debuted in 1964

[www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm)

Descriptions of the agenda and history of the Second Vatican Council

[www.iep.utm.edu/s/soc.cont.htm](http://www.iep.utm.edu/s/soc.cont.htm)

A history of social contract theory

[www.boston.com/globe/spotlight/abuse/overview](http://www.boston.com/globe/spotlight/abuse/overview)

Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage of the priest abuse scandal from The Boston Globe

[www.pubinfo.vcu.edu/artweb/playwriting/subtext.html](http://www.pubinfo.vcu.edu/artweb/playwriting/subtext.html)

A description of the nature and function of subtext in playwriting

### BOOKS

***Bless Me, Father, for I Have Sinned: perspectives on sexual abuse committed by Roman Catholic Priests*** by Thomas G. Plante (Praeger Publishers, 1999)

***Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America*** by John Fialka (St. Martin's Press, 2002). A history of the roles and contributions of nuns in America.

***Unveiled: The Hidden Lives of Nuns*** by Cheryl L. Reed (Berkley Hardcover, 2004). A survey of the diversity in thought and practice among North American nuns.

### PLAYS

***All My Sons*** by Arthur Miller (Samuel French, Inc., 2004)

***The Crucible*** by Arthur Miller (Samuel French, Inc., 2004)

***Oleanna*** by David Mamet (Vintage, 1993)

***Inherit the Wind*** by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee (Samuel French, 2004)

***The Caucasian Chalk Circle*** by Bertold Brecht (Samuel French, 2004)

Plays that illustrate parables, moral dilemmas and doubt

### FILM

***Twelve Angry Men*** directed by Sidney Lumet (MGM, 1956)  
A jury moves from certainty about a defendant's guilt to doubt.

## P.L.A.Y.

**NOW IN ITS 36th YEAR**, Performing for Los Angeles Youth (P.L.A.Y.) is Center Theatre Group's award-winning youth theatre and theatre education program. P.L.A.Y. serves more than 35,000 young people, teachers and families annually through a variety of performances, residencies, discount ticket programs and innovative educational experiences. P.L.A.Y. offers programs that allow young people, teachers and families to attend productions at the Mark Taper Forum, Ahmanson and Kirk Douglas Theatres for low or no cost. P.L.A.Y. is dedicated to artistic excellence and innovation in its theatrical productions and to the development of young people's skills and creativity through the exploration of theatre, its literature, art and imagination.

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# P.L.A.Y.

PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH

## Young Audiences Program 2006–2007

P.L.A.Y. has more excitement in store for you this season! Come back to the Young Audiences Program and see these thrilling plays. Applications are available on CTG's Web site [www.CenterTheatreGroup.org](http://www.CenterTheatreGroup.org), or by calling 213.972.8030.

### Edward Scissorhands

December 14, 2006  
Ahmanson Theatre

#### CONFERENCE

Saturday, November 4, 2006

A dance theatre adaptation of Tim Burton's quirky and affecting fable.

### Yellow Face

June 5–8, 2007  
Mark Taper Forum

#### CONFERENCE

Saturday, May 19, 2007

A satire about cultural identity that blurs truth and fiction to expose the "previously untold events" behind the playwright's disastrous Broadway flop.

#### FUNDER CREDITS

Performing for Los Angeles Youth receives generous support from the Center Theatre Group Affiliates, a volunteer organization dedicated to bringing innovative theatre and creative education to the young people of Los Angeles.

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