THE DIFFICULT PASSAGES FROM TRADITION TO MODERNITY IN THE MOVIE *DOUBT*

Smaranda ŞTEFANOVICI[1] and Bianca Emilia DAN[2]

Abstract

The movie *Doubt*, picturing a catholic school in New York City in the year 1964, presents the dichotomy between old and new, with the two main characters being the archetypes of the rigid tradition on the one hand, represented by Sister Aloysius, and on the other hand the symbol of the liberal, modern future, embodied by Father Flynn. These two very strong characters clash many times through the entire length of the movie, making us question the truth behind their actions. Another theme of the movie is the changing times, symbolized by the omnipresence of a strong and furious wind, which is itself an important character. The wind follows us in every stage of the story, underlining the most important moments. Finally, there is the circle of doubt, which is present from the initial sermon of Father Flynn, culminating with the final scene of Sister Aloysius overcome with grief and uncertainty regarding her actions. The feelings of doubt form a full circle, starting with suspicion, then escalating to the climax of doubt transformed into belief, and ending with the most heart-breaking collapse of Sister Aloysius's certainty into the ever-present feeling of doubt which has followed us all the way through the story and which symbolizes the weaknesses of tradition and rigidity. But in the confrontation between tradition and modernity, it is always the progress that wins. Development and progress are irrepressible, and therefore they will always triumph.

Keywords: doubt, wind of change, tradition, modernity, passage

The movie *Doubt* is set in the year 1964 in the Bronx, New York City, in a predominantly white Irish and Italian Catholic neighborhood. The action takes place in Saint Nicholas Catholic High School, the central point of a neighborhood consisting mainly of devout white Irish and Italian immigrants. In those times, a year after Kennedy's assassination, people were confronted with hopelessness and despair, as Father Flynn preaches in the movie's opening scene. People are worried and lost, and overcome by uncertainty, but the reverend speaks about doubt as being a state of mind just as strong and sustainable as certainty. His sermon about 'doubt' installs the seeds of distrust in the heart and mind of Sister Aloysius, the principal of the school. She resents him for his liberal views and modern approaches, whereas she is a ferocious guardian of tradition. She already has a fundamental distrust of the young pastor. He is much too jovial for her tastes; he suggests that the school Christmas play should include a secular song like "Frosty the Snowman," which Sister Aloysius considers a heretical message about magic; as for his personal habits, he likes too much sugar in his tea, he wears his fingernails too long, he uses a ball-point pen and possesses other hints of sensuality and adaptation to the modern world. Father Flynn harbors a similar disapproval of Sister Aloysius's strict attitudes and demeanor, which he considers to be holding the school and the parish back from the newer vision of 'a welcoming church.' Consequently, she begins

[1] Assoc. Prof. PhD., *Petru Maior* University, Târgu-Mureş
[2] Student, *Petru Maior* University, Târgu-Mureş

BDD-A3089 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:35 UTC)

to suspect that the reverend has a guilty conscience; therefore, she doubts his vows and commitment to Catholicism. She encourages the other nuns to keep their eyes open, somehow instigating them to spy on him and to interpret every single gesture or word he says. When the naïve, young nun Sister James expresses her concern about Father Flynn having a private conversation with one of the altar boys, Donald, who came back from their confidential meeting in a state of visible discomfort and with the smell of alcohol on his breath, Aloysius considers it a proof that the reverend is a child molester. Donald Miller is the first and only black student accepted by the school, which, furthermore, singles him out as a very likely victim of bullying and abuse.

Quickly advancing from doubt to certainty, Sister Aloysius starts a crusade against the reverend, trying to reveal him as a pedophile. Although he never confesses, and actually convinces Sister James of his innocence, the principal succeeds in determining him to ask for a transfer. She lies and threatens, and she almost convinces us, the viewers, of the reverend's guilt. However, this victory is not hers, as much as she seems pleased with her deeds and the success of her blackmail; in the end, Sister Aloysius finds out that the reverend has been promoted to a much better position, in another, more prestigious school, which is a horrific rebuke as far as she is concerned.

The final scene of the movie shows us a desperate and doubtful principal, worried that she has made an irreparable mistake. Hence, the movie begins with a germ of doubt, just a hint of it, which grows into an absolute and atrocious certainty, only to fade back to doubt at the end, but a much more intense and unbearable feeling of doubt, thus creating a complete circle, emphasizing the main theme of the story. It is a subtle piece of writing, raising major social questions and with the answers, in the end, cloaked in ambiguity. Somehow, not getting the answers, makes for an enthralling film that keeps you thinking long after the credits roll.

The Dichotomy between Tradition and Modernity

One of the most striking themes of the movie *Doubt* is the strong disagreement between the conflicting points of view of Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn. While the nun is rigid, inflexible and takes the path of archaic intolerance, the reverend is a forward-thinking, energetic priest. While she is religiously authoritarian and medieval, Father Flynn preaches love and compassion. They are utterly opposed and their personalities clash inevitably numerous times throughout the movie. She is completely and egregiously convinced of his guilt, in spite of the fact that she has no real proof and he denies any wrongdoing. In the end, the old seems to prevail, but it's only the illusion of winning. Sister Aloysius finds out that the reverend has been endorsed a leading position in a more prestigious Catholic school, which is a terrible punishment for the nun. The priest was highly appreciated for his modern views on teaching and interacting with the students. The new way of thinking wins the battle again, progress is unstoppable and old traditions are doomed to perish in the end.

BDD-A3089 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:35 UTC)

A second dichotomy between the old and the new is the struggle of the immigrant parents in their passage from an old, traditional world to the new land. The church and the school makes their passage to America easier, offers them comfort and support, gives them a familiar place to belong to. As a columnist states in his article: "The children's homes might be filled with Irish music or perhaps Italian opera, but the school dances introduced baritone saxophones, early rhythm and blues, and the beginnings of rock. The teachers knew that their role was to bring their charges into the new land and the new society, secular though it may be" (Flanigan 1). America was a blank sheet on which their identity was yet to be inscribed. "It was a kaleidoscope of shifting possibilities." (Bigsby 2) There were too many new prospects, and the immigrant parents needed guidance and moral support. The old traditions would always be part of their lives, but they gladly embraced the new path towards the progressive, modern new world, offering them a better, new life.

Finally, there is the dichotomy created by the complete circle made by Sister Aloysius's feeling of doubt, which progresses, from a vague suspicion in the beginning, to the confident, biased, full blown certainty of the sin, which gives her the strength to lie and threaten to destroy the priest's reputation, only to descend in the despair of the doubt by the end of the movie.

Old traditions and customs never prevail; they will ultimately be replaced by modernity, by novelty. It is the natural evolution of the human race, the normal tendency to advance towards the future, to develop and to expand our horizon.

The Wind of Change

The strong late autumn wind is in itself a prevalent character of the movie, emphasizing the violence of the feelings and the changing times. Change is the leitmotif of the movie, and it almost seems that it is part of the cast. Wind is a symbolic presence throughout, the storminess designating both the ugliness in the Catholic Church that would be revealed decades later and the winds of change sweeping through it – for instance, the Second Vatican Council, which addressed the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the modern world.

Firstly, we have Sister Aloysius making a comment after a devastating storm that "the wind has changed". The destruction made by the strength of the storm is unusual; the courtyard is filled with broken branches. Also, quite a few times the wind sends dry leaves into her office through a window which is accidentally left open, making her wonder about the strength of the wind gusts. She also makes an interesting comment about the wind, saying that it is "so peripatetic this year!" showing that she has an amazingly extensive vocabulary, making us wonder about her education before becoming a nun. But she is immovable in front of any tempest. To Sister Aloysius, it's all about standards, morality and tradition. "Every easy choice today will have its consequences tomorrow, mark my words," (*Doubt*) she fumes and she sets about blowing away the

BDD-A3089 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:35 UTC)

priest like a whirlwind for something that has, in more recent years, become the shame of the Catholic Church.

Secondly, Father Flynn talks a lot about change, trying to convince Sister Aloysius that the times are new, the church has changed, and he suggests that the nuns should be friendlier to the children. He is regarded with contempt by the nun for even suggesting to be friendly with the parishioners or children, when her authority was based on fear. Another reference to the power of the wind is made by him in a sermon about gossip, held after the naïve Sister James initiates the hunt for pedophiles by expressing her concern about the unnatural relationship between the priest and Donald. In this sermon on gossip, Father Flynn tells the story of a priest who instructs a woman to cut open a pillow in the wind and retrieve the feathers, thus referring to the implacable power of wind in spreading everything on its wings. He also refers to the wind in his final sermon, when he tells the congregation about his decision to leave, saying that the wind which pushes him through life is now taking him away from this beloved parish.

Lastly, the attitude towards the oppressed ethnic categories is also changing. We are told that Donald is the first and only "negro" in the school, which shows an attitude of acceptance towards the African-American community, considering the fact that this is a white Catholic school. Furthermore, there is a vague hint that Donald has homosexual tendencies, consequently having had to transfer from the public school system to a private catholic school in order to escape bullying. In addition, another level of evil operative in the parish neighborhood is revealed when Sister Aloysius holds a private conference with Donald's mother, who works as a cleaning woman in a nearby apartment complex. In their disturbing and thrilling conversation, Mrs. Muller reveals other facts about the boy's home life and his personal confusion, as well as her own attitude towards the accusations, exposing some dark truths about race, class and the desperate search for upward mobility that private education promises to inner-city children.

The old ways are also changing in reference to the subservient role nuns have always played in the Catholic Church and the resentment towards their medieval degradation of women. As one critic noticed, "the film exposes a deeper layer of institutional injustice that may account for Sister Aloysius's need to dominate the only realm under her control. As she remarks at one point, in the Catholic Church, men run everything. Even she must admit that, in the Church's patriarchal system, Father Flynn is technically her superior." (Tueth 2) Sister Aloysius has the courage to speak up in a time when people were afraid to talk about pedophilia, a time when people blindly trusted the clergy. She is a leader, a very strong and determined woman, obsessively pursuing wrongdoing, so unlike the innocent, sweet and dedicated Sister James, who is easily convinced of Father Flynn's innocence.

In conclusion, times are changing and the wind is there, with its strength and blasts, to underline the uncontrollable power of development, of evolution.

BDD-A3089 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:35 UTC)

The Circle of Doubt

Doubt is the central theme and the most recurrent motif of the film, hence the title. Sister Aloysius is an extremely intolerant and biased nun, therefore trying to find a way to destroy or to eliminate a priest that she doesn't like, mainly because he doesn't conform to her strict rules of conduct. In her rigid, inflexible manner, she cannot accept a priest who is liberal, modern and kind. She even resents Father Flynn for using a ballpoint pen instead of a traditional fountain pen, for liking sugar in his tea or for having long fingernails. She is constantly searching for reasons to confirm her doubts about him, and she finally convinces herself that he is a child abuser, in spite of the complete lack of evidence.

She plants the seed of suspicion in her mind at hearing Father Flynn's sermon about doubt, considering that he must have an underlying reason for choosing it as a speech theme and thinking that the priest himself must doubt the authenticity of his own vows. From here on, she obsessively tries to find evidence of his wrongdoings, convincing herself that she is correct in assuming the worst about him and that a guilty conscience has made him want to talk about doubt. She lies to him and she makes threats in trying to convince him to confess. Her doubt grows into a full-scale certainty, and she has the confidence to convince herself of the righteousness of her actions. As a movie reviewer stated "the drama pulls us between our admiration of Sister Aloysius's uncompromising search for the truth and Father Flynn's promotion of tolerance and compassion" (Tueth 2). They are both extremely strong characters and neither of them can convince us, without any trace of doubt, that he/she is telling the truth.

He finally leaves after she promises to destroy his reputation. She feels victorious, but she is the one who is defeated in the end. The priest gets a promotion, while she is devastated by the thought that she has caused harm to a possibly innocent man. The feelings of doubt form a full circle, starting with suspicion, then escalating to the climax of certitude, and ending with the collapse of Sister Aloysius's certainty into the ever-present feeling of doubt which has followed us all the way through the story and which symbolizes the weaknesses of tradition and rigidity. The circle closes in the end, the movie ending on the same note with the feeling of doubt, and it also leaves us uncertain of the priest's guilt. As viewers, we permanently oscillate from believing one of them to trusting the other.

Conclusions

In the clash of the old with the new, it is always the progress that wins. Traditions are valuable and will always be preserved and cherished, but development is inevitable and unstoppable. The times are permanently changing, and the force of evolution cannot be halted. As much as we want to perpetuate our heritage, the only viable solution is to be open-minded and forward-thinking, acceptant of modernity.

Love and tolerance are the universal answer to well-being and harmony in the world. Kindness does not always denote weakness, and rigidity is not the definition of

BDD-A3089 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:35 UTC)

strength and virtue. The old ways were austere and inflexible, but they were replaced by adaptability and resilience. The passage from the implacable old times to the sympathetic new ones will be always difficult, because transitions are seldom easy, but change will occur regardless of our sternness and intolerance of the new. Old traditions never transcend modernity; they will ultimately be replaced by innovation, by novelty. It is the natural evolution of the human race, the normal tendency to advance towards the future, to develop and to grow.

Bibliography:

Alleva, Richard. "Trick, No Treat." *commonwealmagazine.org* January 30, 2009, Web. 27 Feb. 2012

Ansen, David. "Doubt." *thedailybeast.com*, Newsweek Magazine ,Dec. 8, 2008: 66. Web. 28 Jan. 2012

Barker, Chris. *Cultural Studies*. London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2008. Print.

Bigsby, Christopher. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006. Print

Doubt, movie, 2008, director John Patrick Shanley, Miramax Films

Flanigan, James. "The Priests, the Nuns and the People." *jamesflanigan.com*, National Catholic Reporter. March 9, 2009. Web. 10 May 2012

Fuller, Karla. "Ethnic Representation and Film." *ejumpcut.org*, Jump Cut, May 1997. Web. 9 May 2012

Horwitz, Simi. "Choice Cuts." backstage.com, Back Stage, Dec. 11, 2008. Web. 29 Jan. 2012

Petrakis, John. "Doubt." *christiancentury.org*, The Christian Century, Dec. 30, 2008. Web. 28 Feb. 2012

Tueth, Michael V. "Uncertain Sympathies: John Patrick Shanley's 'Doubt'." *bishop-accountability.org*, America Magazine, Dec. 15, 2008. Web. 28 Jan. 2012

BDD-A3089 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:35 UTC)