*Doubt*

[*Doubt*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0918927/%3Fref_=nv_sr_3);Miramax Films, 2008; Directed by John Patrick Shanley; Starring: Meryl Streep, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams, Viola Davis; PG-13. [Watch the trailer](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnrmWLp1Ub8).

Summary:

Set in the Bronx in 1964, this story begins at a time of transition for America. Kennedy was shot in ‘63, Vatican II nears its end, and LBJ begins his escalation of the Vietnam War. In 2008, when the film was released, the War in Iraq was still going as well as the revelation and investigation of the Catholic sex abuse scandal. *Doubt* intentionally situates itself within that context to play off the audience’s doubts and the doubts of the sixties. The film follows four characters. Sister James approaches Sister Aloysius regarding Father Flynn, who the two suspect of abusing a boy at their Catholic school. Accusations are made and retracted, insults are hurled, and voices are raised as the truth becomes increasingly hard to find. Eventually, Mrs. Miller, the boy’s mother, enters in what might be the most shocking scene of the entire film. John Patrick Shanley, who wrote and directed the film, also wrote and directed the play, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the Tony Award for Best Play.

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Symbols: Wind/storms/thunder, cat/mouse, the eye, fingernails, flowers, open windows, and the light bulb.
* Kindness. Father Flynn says he can look at Sister James and know her philosophy is kindness. One could argue Sister James has an excess of kindness and Sister Aloysius has none.
* Nature & actions. Sister Aloysius says she only cares about actions, while Mrs. Miller speaks of her son’s nature.
* Truth. The audience is never told the truth about Father Flynn, and yet viewers typically have a set opinion. The film hints that there is great danger in claiming to possess the truth.
* Faith. Belief and faith define Sister Aloysius’ reality. Even without proof, “I have my certainty,” she says. In the play’s Preface, Shanley calls faith a “shared dream we agreed to call Reality.”
* Doubt and certainty. Every character in the film has occasions of alternating doubt and certainty.

Discussion Questions:

1. The play is actually titled “Doubt: A Parable.” How is this film a parable and not a fairy tale, allegory, or fable?
2. What words are never used? Why? (Examples: abuse, sex, molestation, and homosexuality.)
3. In the play’s version of the scene where Father Flynn talks to the boys on the basketball court, Flynn is on the stage alone and the *audience* is the group of boys to whom he talks. What does this achieve?
4. Dissect Mrs. Miller’s motivations. She says, “It’s only ’til June,” and she also talks of the “boy’s nature.”
5. How does the cinematography frequently communicate the mood of a scene?
6. Is doubt an expression of humility? How can doubt be geared toward both despair and hope? Does the film endorse doubt as a profitable and unresolvable state?