

"You don't know: you haven't seen: it is so easy to talk when you don't know." Discuss Shaw's presentation of ignorance.

*Saint Joan* is a play replete with ignorance on multiple levels: its central character Joan is surrounded by an ignorant society that fails to understand her exceptional piety and courage, yet she herself is plagued by a naive ignorance of societal customs and the forces of authority. While society's ignorance of Joan and Joan's ignorance of society collectively lead to her tragic death, perhaps the larger tragedy of the play is the enduring nature of ignorance. Society remains stuck in its ignorance throughout the play: even at the very end, it was only able to understand Joan as a martyr rather than her true self.

Firstly, Shaw explores society's ignorance of visionary figures in its midst by presenting the persistent inability of other characters to understand the exceptional Joan. From her entry in Scene 1, Joan's status as an outstanding figure is made clear by her visual distinctiveness: she is dressed in "red", not only a bold, striking colour that reflects her exceptionality but also a sign of purity in Christian literature that foregrounds her superlative piety. Further, Shaw emphasises that she has "eyes very wide apart and bulging", the motif of sight used to reveal her insightful, visionary nature. Joan goes on to demonstrate these exceptional qualities: she fearlessly declares she will help France win the war and crown Charles as King in emphatic proclamations ("I am sent to you to drive the English away", "I can turn thee [Charles] into a King, in Rheims Cathedral"), evincing her outstanding courage. Joan also claims to have personal communication with God: she calls the "voices" she hears "messages from God", this mystical divine connection reinforcing her exceptionality.

However, other characters consistently fail to understand the visionary Joan, demonstrating society's ignorance in the process. Charles — whose ignorance vis-a-vis Joan is revealed by his "little narrow eyes" as opposed to Joan's "bulging" ones — is unable to comprehend Joan's larger plans for him in Scene 2, focusing instead on superficial concerns like the cost of a coronation ("Anne will want new dresses. We can't afford them."). Other ignorant characters define Joan within their own parochial worldviews: Joan is called a "witch" by the Steward who attributes the lack of eggs to her presence in Scene 1, while La Hire assumes she "struck Foul-Mouthed Frank dead for swearing", proceeding to call her an "angel" without realising she never claimed to be one. When confronted with her exceptionality, Robert and the Archbishop repeatedly dismiss her as crazy ("this girl's mad", "cracked country lass", "this crazy wench") — they are so trapped within their ignorant understanding of the world that Joan's visionary ideas have to be excluded from rational consideration altogether. Additionally,

Joan's progressive conception of direct communication with God was such a radical idea for the Catholic authorities that they ignorantly misidentify her voices as a sign of heresy. Cauchon says in Scene 4 she is "inspired, but diabolically inspired", her divine inspiration grossly misinterpreted as its polar opposite of devilish evil ("diabolically"). Thus, other characters demonstrate in varying ways a perennial inability to understand the extraordinary Joan, making societal ignorance of outstanding figures a key reason for Joan's increasing estrangement.

Societal ignorance is not the only factor that led to her tragic death: it is Joan's own ignorance of social mores that contributed to her eventual downfall. In Scene 2, it is revealed not only that Joan has "bobbed" hair, a bold, transgressive hairstyle in Shaw's time, but also that she "dresse[s] like a soldier" above her female, peasant-born status. This was an especially large violation of social customs since the appropriacy of clothing was of paramount importance in Joan's era, constituting a key part of not only Church-dictated modesty but also medieval sumptuary laws. Hence, Joan's blatant disregard for these customs evinces minimally her ignorance of their importance, if not their existence. This unwitting transgressiveness makes Joan the enemy of many later on: not only does de Stogumber urge for her execution on the basis that she "rebels against Nature by wearing man's clothes", but the Inquisitor also cites her "quarrel[ing] with her clothes" as evidence for her heresy. In this light, ignorance of society's norms becomes Joan's hamartia.

Additionally, Joan's persistent lack of awareness vis-a-vis societal hierarchies becomes increasingly apparent throughout the play as her politeness towards authority figures fades. Not only does she irreverently call military leaders "fat-heads" in Scene 4, but she also dares in Scene 5 to "ris[e] impetuously" to lecture Dunois on military affairs, his own area of expertise ("I tell you, Bastard, your art of war is no use"). Further, Joan refuses to emerge from her ignorance even after repeated attempts to enlighten her: after Dunois explains how Joan "never counts the cost" of war and will be "taken by the enemy", Joan is instead "flattered" and focuses on the size of the bounty on her head ("Sixteen thousand pounds!") In this manner, Joan's recalcitrant ignorance and obstinate lack of self-awareness alienates her from the court: an "offended" Bluebeard compares her to "Caesar" and "Alexander", historical figures that exemplified the fatal flaw of hubris, while the Archbishop warns her that "pride will have a fall". Hence, Joan's tragic death was brought by the mutual inability of Joan and society to understand each other — society was ignorant of her visionary qualities, while she was ignorant of how society expected her to behave.

Ultimately, however, the tragedy of Joan's death is superseded by the tragedy of ignorance's persistence: even after her death, society was never able to understand Joan beyond her

status as a martyr. Following Joan's execution, Shaw offers a sliver of hope that society would be able to escape its ignorance of Joan's character: de Stogumber cries that "it is so easy to talk when you don't know", his repeated apostrophising ("O God... O Christ... Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!") evincing the superlative intensity of his guilt and his ostensible awakening from ignorance. Additionally, Stogumber "fall[s] on his knees", the act of kneeling a sign of deep contrition. However, even as de Stogumber declares in the Epilogue that watching the execution "saved him", it becomes clear that he has not understood her ultimate nature: he ironically fails to recognise Joan's figure ("Oh no; it was not you") despite the monumental impact her death had on him. De Stogumber further says his "sight is very bad", the deficits in his physical vision mirroring the incompleteness of his mental enlightenment. Hence, de Stogumber remains ignorant as he can only understand Joan through her death rather than her life — he knows her better as the girl "burned to a cinder" rather than the visionary she was.

This persistent ignorance is further seen in the Epilogue, where Shaw swiftly undercuts society's belated recognition of Joan's exceptional qualities, with the ostensibly widespread nature of praise for Joan emphasised by the use of epistrophe (e.g. "The girls in the field praise thee", "The dying soldiers praise thee"). However, after a glorious scene where the play's key figures of authority "kneel" to Joan in reverence, Joan's suggestion of "ris[ing] from the dead" is met with "a sudden darkness [that] blots out the room" before they all "spring to their feet in consternation". The abrupt change in lighting and their rapid change in posture highlight the dramatic divergence between society's attitudes toward Joan as a living woman as opposed to a dead icon. In this light, society's long-awaited understanding of Joan as a visionary is revealed to be a superficial one — it has understood Joan as a martyr but remains ignorant of her true, living self. In the end, Joan's forlorn question at the close of the play — "how long, O Lord, how long?" — reveals the play's ultimate tragedy: Joan's society remains ignorant during her life and after her death, and dispelling ignorance takes a long, long time.