

# John Patrick Shanley's *Prodigal Son*: A working class youth at a Catholic high school in the 1960s

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*At the Manhattan Theatre Club, New York City, through March 27th*

American playwright John Patrick Shanley's latest offering is inspired by the author's time spent in the Thomas More Preparatory School in the state of New Hampshire from 1965-1968.

Most of the students at the Roman Catholic private school come from upper middle class backgrounds. Fifteen-year-old Jim Quinn (Timothée Chalamet), however—the central character, representing Shanley—is a working class youth from the Bronx who has just arrived on a scholarship.

Quinn is a restless young man with a burning intellect and a strikingly rebellious streak. He quotes a wide ranging number of authors, including Plato, Heraclitus, Byron, Whitman and Shakespeare. His inquisitive mind and intelligence, however, are coupled with a rage that results in Quinn drowning himself in alcohol, and in fistfights with fellow students throughout his time at the school.

We get an initial glimpse of Quinn's intelligence through an interaction with his roommate Austin (David Potts). Austin, somewhat stereotypically, is the clichéd mathematical "nerd," contrasted with the streetwise and poetic Quinn. Such polar opposites can create interesting dynamics in the theater if the complexities and contradictions of both characters emerge, but in this scene that fails to happen. Quinn appears dogmatic, as he attempts to educate Austin on literature and on the supposed wiles of women's ways.

At this point we also first learn of Jim's preoccupation with writing violent and petulant poetry directed towards those he describes as Nazis. Quinn has also been parading around the school grounds in a T-shirt that provocatively states, "Pray for War."

Upon hearing this, school Headmaster Carl Schmitt (Chris McGarry), not surprisingly, is alarmed. He summons English teacher Alan Hoffman (Robert Sean Leonard) for a discussion on Quinn's temperament. The headmaster

somewhat ironically refers to Quinn as "the most interesting mess we've had this year," and places him in the care of Hoffman for private tutoring, with the remark, "You're good with the troubled ones."

Schmitt is depicted as a mean-spirited disciplinarian, a devout Catholic who is staunchly conservative in his views. Hoffman, although quite aloof, is presented as the more humane character. In addressing the issue of Quinn's T-shirt, Schmitt remarks that "boys of his background are patriotic about war"—a sweeping and false generalization that the writer chooses not to further explore.

This points to the problems in this play, the latest of about two dozen written by Shanley in the course of his career. The playwright presents some important issues and then proceeds to skirt them, leaving his audience with little more than banal liberalism and skepticism.

This can be seen with Shanley's treatment of the war in Vietnam, where the massive escalation of US involvement coincided with the period depicted in the play.

Is Shanley suggesting, in line with Schmitt's remarks, that the hundreds of thousands of working class American youth who were drafted to fight in Vietnam did so willingly? Or even that those who volunteered were simply "pro-war," rather than impelled in most cases by economic and social status? The play makes no mention of the mass protests and anti-war sentiment that existed during these years.

It would seem reasonable to expect that Jim Quinn was affected by these developments. Whether or not he himself was opposing the war, surely some of his classmates were, but none of this is broached in *Prodigal Son*.

Nor is there any consideration of where Jim's poetry might be coming from. Did he perhaps lose a relative in World War II? Again we are left without explanation.

Shanley himself spent time in Vietnam with the U.S. Marine Corps. In an interview with Christy Stanlake, Associate Professor of the United States Naval Academy, Shanley commented: "My neighborhood was insane with

racists. There were no black people in my neighborhood; there were no Latino people in my neighborhood. If one came in, they were attacked. This was not my cup of tea: I was raised admiring John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., but that was the milieu. And also I was very affected by the Woodstock generation and the idea of love, peace and happiness. So I was very aware of the dichotomy before I ever got to the Marine Corps. When I got to the Marine Corps, what I said was ‘This is the most civilized place I’ve ever been.’”

Shanley rejected racism, but he also seems, like many a middle class liberal, to have identified it with the working class, rather than considering its real class roots in the capitalist system, as well as the role of the police, the media and the big business politicians.

In answer to racism, the playwright seems to suggest “love, peace and happiness,” but his liberalism is of the sort that coexisted easily with the view of the Marine Corps as “civilized.”

Of course it is the playwright’s prerogative and indeed his or her job to portray every aspect of human life, including the backwardness that exists in the world. But to do so without any social or historical context, any exploration of why such views existed and still exist, is a superficial approach, and one that makes it very difficult to create fully formed and appealing characters.

The neighborhood that Shanley (born in 1950) grew up in was a largely Irish and Italian immigrant area (including first-generation Americans) in the Bronx. His mother worked as a telephone operator and his father was a meat packer. He graduated as a valedictorian from New York University but before his playwriting career took off he worked a series of “day jobs,” such as an elevator operator, furniture mover, apartment painter, florist and locksmith. This period of his life unquestionably gave him some feeling for working class dialogue, and there are moments in some of Shanley’s earlier works where that comes to the fore.

This was the case in his first major success, *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea*, produced Off-Broadway in 1984. The play centers around the lives of two violence-prone individuals who seek solace in each other’s company after meeting in a Bronx bar. But although the dialogue in this piece is sharp and believable, the play, like so much of Shanley’s work, leaves the most important issues unexplored. There is a reluctance to examine the conditions that lead his characters to behave the way they do. Usually we are left with a perspective that can be summed up in the adage, “love conquers all.”

This sentiment also appears in *Outside Mullingar*, produced on Broadway in 2014, about a lonely middle aged Irish farmer who eventually finds happiness. This play

garnered Shanley a Tony Award nomination.

When Shanley has tried to deal with more openly social and political questions, the results have also been generally unsuccessful. One example is *Dirty Story*, a play that centers around a sado-masochistic couple whose relationship is intended as an allegory for Israel’s military occupation of Palestine. Here too the critical issues are not dealt with in a serious fashion.

In the WSWS review of the film adaptation of Shanley’s best known work, *Doubt*, a play that revolves around allegations of sexual molestation by a Catholic priest, we characterized the work as “conformist ideologically and fiercely mediocre as an artistic effort.” We added, “Shanley apparently accepts everything about the world. How can an artist accomplish anything on such a basis?”

Without giving too much information away, *Prodigal Son* proceeds rather predictably, as English teacher Hoffman takes Jim under his wing, nurturing his blossoming talent and urging him on towards graduation, until a contrived denouement throws the proverbial spanner into the plot. The aftermath is something we are expected to ponder deeply, but there is far too little food for thought provided.

In one of the more sincerely written lines in *Prodigal Son*, the protagonist poignantly remarks, “The only way I know anything about what I am is what I see in other people’s eyes.” Perhaps Shanley should heed his central character’s advice, and stop writing almost exclusively about himself and his personal experiences. A closer and more concrete look at the world and the lives of others would be a good starting point.



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