

Joan of Arc

Comprehensive Summary & Exam Preparation Notes • Glen Tutorials

About the Playwright: George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950)

George Bernard Shaw was a world-renowned Irish playwright, critic, and polemicist who penned more than sixty plays during his lifetime. His most notable works include *Man and Superman* (1902), *Pygmalion* (1912), and *Saint Joan* (1923), from which this dramatic excerpt is adapted. Recognized as the leading dramatist of his era, Shaw was awarded the **Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925** for his work, marked by both idealism and humanity.

1. Historical Context & Setting

The play is set during the historic **Hundred Years War** (fought between England and France from **1337 to 1453**). By the year **1429**, France was facing absolute ruin. Foreign forces controlled all of northern France and massive parts of the southwest. The English controlled vast territories, while their allies, the Burgundians, controlled the rest.

The strategic city of **Orleans**, one of the final remaining bastions of French resistance, was completely surrounded and besieged by the English. The French heir to the throne, the **Dauphin**, had taken refuge in the city of **Chinon**, living in fear and refusing to fight. It is in this atmosphere of despair that Joan, an uneducated peasant girl from eastern France, rises to execute a divine mission.

2. Character Profiles

A. Joan (The Maid)

- **Identity & Origins:** A well-built, strong 17-to-18-year-old country girl from Lorraine, known as "Jenny" in her hometown and "The Maid" to the soldiers.
- **Key Traits:** Brimming with absolute courage, unmatched confidence, and profound spiritual faith. She is completely immune to intimidations or angry glares from military officers.
- **Mission:** To secure a horse, armor, and an escort of soldiers to reach the Dauphin at Chinon, break the siege of Orleans, and purge French soil of English invaders.

B. Captain Robert de Baudricourt

- **Identity:** A stern, rigid, and traditional French military officer (squire) stationed at Vaucouleurs.

- **Key Traits:** Practical, highly skeptical, easily annoyed, and dismissive of supernatural occurrences or "miracles." He initially sees Joan as a raving lunatic or a simple country girl out of her mind.

C. Bertrand de Poulengey (Polly)

- **Identity:** A mature French guard and soldier under Captain Robert's command.
- **Key Traits:** Intuitive, thoughtful, and brave. Unlike Robert, he feels inspired by Joan's unwavering conviction and realizes that only a miracle can save France from impending defeat.

3. Detailed Scene Analysis & The Plot

The Steward's Revelation

The excerpt opens with Captain Robert furiously reprimanding his steward. Robert had previously commanded his men to throw Joan out of the castle. He questions how fifty armed soldiers and dozens of strong servants could fail to execute his orders out of fear of a single country girl. The steward replies with a profound psychological insight: *"No sir, we are afraid of you, but she puts courage in us. She really doesn't seem to be afraid of anything."* This sets the foundation for Joan's primary superpower: her ability to infect others with bravery.

The Confident Confrontation

When Joan is called up, she enters with absolute clarity. She does not plead; she commands. She confidently demands a horse costing **sixteen francs**, standard soldier's armor (saving money by avoiding customized, expensive armor), and a tiny escort of soldiers. When Robert stands shocked by her casual statement that she will **"free Orleans,"** Joan list-outs her recruits: **Polly (Poulengey), Jack (Monsieur de Metz),** John Godsave, Dick the Archer, and their servants. Her flawless prior planning leaves Robert stunned.

Cause-and-Effect Relationship

Cause: The traditional French military leadership is terrified, hiding in corners, and fighting merely "to save their skins" by fleeing from the brutal English forces.

Effect: The troops become thoroughly demoralized ("cowed") and lose every battle, allowing the English to turn the entire country into a desert. Joan changes this dynamic by shifting the motive from individual survival to collective patriotic duty—fighting for the absolute freedom of France.

The Turning Point: Robert and Poulengey's Dialogue

After dismissing Joan to the courtyard, Robert consults Poulengey, accusing him of losing his mind for taking her seriously. Poulengey defends his stance with cold logic: the Dauphin is cornered like a rat in Chinon, the English are bound to capture Orleans, and normal military strategies have failed completely. He famously tells Robert: **"Nothing can save our side now but a miracle... I think the girl herself is a bit of a miracle."**

When Robert wavers, stating that miracles simply do not happen nowadays, Poulengey counters that her words have **"put fire into me."** He notes that they desperately need a few "mad" people now, given where the "sane" ones have led France.

Joan's Core Philosophy: Faith vs. Might

Robert recalls Joan to quiz her. He warns her about the terrifying nature of the English soldiers who plunder and burn, led by a prince who acts like the devil. Joan stands unmoved, declaring: **"I don't think it can be very difficult if God is on your side."** She accurately explains why the French troops fail: they fight out of fear to save their own lives. She promises to teach them to fight for France, after which they will drive the English out like sheep.

The Resolution: Washing Hands Off Responsibility

Convinced that his own words cannot inspire the troops but Joan's absolute conviction might, Robert finally gives in. He grants her official permission to travel to Chinon under Poulengey's escort and gives her freedom to select a soldier's dress. In a classic moment of bureaucratic relief, he states, **"I wash my hands off it,"** relieving himself of any blame should the venture fail, yet opening the gates for one of the greatest military campaigns in history.

***Section Key Takeaway:** True leadership is not defined by official ranks or physical weapons, but by the spiritual clarity and inner conviction to inspire hope where none exists. Joan breaks through rigid military skepticism purely using the power of unshakeable faith.*

4. Key Vocabulary & Important Scientific/Textual Terms

Textual Term	Exact Contextual Meaning
Squire	A person of high birth or cultural rank; a title used here by Joan to address Captain Robert.
Dauphin	The oldest son of the King of France; the official heir apparent who would inherit the crown.
Armour	Protective, heavy metal or leather clothing worn by warriors in ancient times to deflect weapons.
Blockhead	A deeply insulting term denoting a profoundly stupid or thick-skulled person.
Cowed	Frightened, intimidated, or completely subdued into submission by a show of force.
Raising a Siege	The military act of driving away an enemy force surrounding a town, thereby rescuing its inhabitants.
Wash one's hands off	An idiomatic expression meaning to completely refuse to take any further responsibility for an action.

5. Common Mistakes Students Make in Exams

Watch Out for These Flaws in Your Answers:

- **Misunderstanding the French Defeat:** Do not write that French soldiers were weak or lacked weapons. Clearly state, as Joan does, that they failed because their core motivation was flawed—they fought to save their skins rather than for the pride of France.
- **Conflating the Dauphin's Character:** Students often depict the Dauphin as a brave king. In this context, he is described as a fearful ruler hiding "like a rat in a corner."
- **Misinterpreting the Word "Mad":** When Poulengey says they need "a few mad people," he doesn't mean clinically insane people. He means individuals with radical, unconventional thinking who defy standard, failed logic.

6. Memory Tips, Tricks, and Exam-Oriented Points

High-Scoring Revision Secrets

- **The "Fire" Metaphor:** Remember the phrase "*have put fire into me.*" Use it when describing Joan's impact on Poulengey and the general public. It signifies inspiration and psychological transformation.
- **Character Contrast Hook:** Always contrast Robert's rigidity with Poulengey's openness. This contrast highlights how the youth and common soldier were far quicker to sense hope than seasoned bureaucrats.
- **The Core Argument:** If asked what made Robert change his mind, remember the key quote: **nothing they said could put fire into the troops, but Joan's words could.** He risks his career because her infectious courage is a strategic military asset.

Ultimate Chapter Takeaway: *George Bernard Shaw's Joan of Arc illustrates that when conventional systems collapse under the weight of fear and absolute despair, redemption emerges from unconventional quarters. Through unwavering confidence and love for one's homeland, an ordinary youth can alter history.*