

Context: Encountering Conflict

Bertolt Brecht's *Life of Galileo*

Historical Context

- Life of Galileo is set in the 1600s, during the Renaissance – a period of great change in Europe in which people began to look at their world in a different way. Many believed they were living in a 'new age', so full was it of new ideas, new discoveries and new inventions.
- Renaissance Italy was a centre of artistic and intellectual ferment, the home of the great geniuses of the age – Machiavelli, Da Vinci, Petrarch and Michelangelo, among others.
- Italy was the birthplace of the Renaissance, but its spirit of inquiry quickly spread throughout Europe.
- Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) was an Italian physicist, mathematician, astronomer, and philosopher who played a major role in the emergence of the modern sciences.
- In the seventeenth century, the Catholic Church was immensely powerful (and wealthy).
- During this period, the popes were enjoying the peak of their influence: not just the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church they also served as secular leaders, controlling much of central Italy around their seat in Rome.
- The majority of people were very religious and trusted the authority of the Church on all matters.

Plot Overview

Brecht's play portrays Galileo as he struggles with the church over his attempts to prove the Copernican theory of a heliocentric solar system. The play opens as Galileo teaches his theory to eleven year old Andrea Sarti, his housekeeper's son. He is initially celebrated as a great man of the Renaissance – until the church condemns his teachings, fearing that he will begin to question the order of the social system, too.

For eight years, he stops his research, but when an argument about sunspots piques his interest, and he is compelled to begin his study again. His daughter, Virginia, is engaged to the wealthy and stupid Ludovico. Ludovico breaks off the engagement when Galileo starts his research again, and Virginia resents her father for it. When Cardinal Barberini, a man of the Enlightenment, becomes pope, Galileo hopes that the church will change its position, but Barberini, now Pope Urban VIII, is pressured to censure the scientist.

Galileo recants his theories under threat of torture, and for the remaining years of his life, he writes in secret, only to have his papers confiscated. Only Virginia is proud of him, and she keeps a watchful eye on him. He manages to keep a copy of his work hidden in a globe, which the now 39 year old Andrea smuggles out of Italy. Andrea berates him for his recantation. Galileo admits that he recanted out of a fear of torture and proclaims that he has betrayed science.

The conflict between Galileo and the Catholic Church

Scene 7

- Cardinal Bellarmine announces the Church has officially rejected Copernicus' theory as 'heretical' and instructs Galileo to abandon his view. (p.60)
- He tells Galileo that revising basic astronomical concepts could jeopardise the peasantry's faith in the Bible and with it the entire fabric of society.
- Galileo doesn't contend that God doesn't exist; he declares that humanity's view of God's creation is wrong.
- Galileo is brought to the attention of the Cardinal Inquisitor. Secretaries create transcripts of the conversations had with Galileo.

- *What type of conflict is this?*

- *What is the cause of this conflict?*

Scene 8

- The Little Monk visits Galileo and tries to talk him out of maintaining his views. Galileo insists that the authorities have effectively bribed him not to stir up the peasants (lower class). (pp.66-7)
- When the monk suggests that the truth might somehow get through on its own, Galileo replies that it needs to be forced through. (p.68)

Scene 9

- Galileo remains silent for 8 years (1624). However, with the ascension of a new pope, who is himself a scientist, he is encouraged to resume his research into sunspots (a forbidden area). (pp.77-9)

Scene 10

- 1632. Galileo publishes his work in the common language (Italian, rather than Latin) and it spreads amongst the lower class. The response of the 'common people' is to declare that Galileo has broken the authority of the Bible and, consequently, the Church. (pp.84-5)

Scene 11

- 1633. Galileo has a copy of his book 'Dialogues on Two World Systems' to give the Grand Duke of Florence, but he declines it. The Inquisition summons Galileo to Rome. (pp.87-8 & 89)

Scene 12

- The Cardinal Inquisitor tells the Pope of his concerns about the social unrest provoked by Galileo's publication. Initially, the Pope is reluctant to move against the greatest physicist of the day. However, he eventually agrees that Galileo's doctrine should be declared heretical and that he should be encouraged to recant (retract his theory) by being shown the instruments of torture. (pp.92-3)

Scene 13

- Galileo goes before the Inquisition and recants his theory. (p.95-8)

- *What is the role of each of the characters in the conflict?*