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Amongst Women": O'Brien, Beckett, and The Magdalen "Réamhscéal

Tiffany N. Manning

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“AMONGST WOMEN”:

O’BRIEN, BECKETT, AND THE MAGDALEN “RÉAMHSCÉAL”

by

TIFFANY MANNING

(Under the Direction of Howard Keeley)

ABSTRACT

It is hard to escape the portrayal of what twentieth century life might have been like for a penitent living in one of Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries. With its saturation in contemporary pop culture, the morality of these Irish Institutions has been called into question through blockbuster films and best-selling books. However, some believe that the many public representations of the Magdalen Laundries fail to tell the whole story. As tension surrounding Magdalen Laundries, as well as Church and State involvement in them, has continuously grown over the last couple of decades, many citizens of Ireland and, indeed, the world have begun demanding to know the realities behind the phenomenon. In order to help elucidate the details of the controversy—and to begin moving forward in the pursuit of enlightenment— this thesis reviews and explicates several texts that predate what could be deemed Ireland’s Magdalen literature, arguing that they constitute réamhscéala, or pre-tales, useful in establishing a genealogy for such influential texts as Patricia Burke Brogan’s play *Eclipsed* (1992) and the movies *The Magdalen Sisters* and *Philomena*. The réamhscéal (singular form) is a staple of ancient Irish epic literature: a tale that precedes the core narrative and without which that narrative can stand; but a tale that nonetheless helps enlighten the main action. Before the emergence of the identifiable genre that has come to be known as Magdalen literature,

certain authors were already writing on or at least alluding to the matter of women and their institutionalization (whether in fact or in effect). Two major figures, Kate O'Brien and Samuel Beckett, produced novels—*Without My Cloak* and *Murphy*, respectively—that may be counted among the réamhscéala of the Magdalen texts that have been emerging since the early 1990s.

INDEX WORDS: Magdalen Laundries, Magdalen Asylums, Ireland, Kate O'Brien, Samuel Beckett, Patricia Burke Brogan, Institutions

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CHAPTER 1

The Rise of Magdalen Laundries in Ireland: An Introduction

It is hard to escape the portrayal of what 20th century life might have been like for a penitent living in one of Ireland's Magdalen Laundries¹. With its saturation in contemporary pop culture, the morality of these Irish Institutions has been called into question through blockbuster films and best-selling books. *Philomena*, a film portrayal of a true story about the journey a son takes to find his birth mother, an ex-penitent, or woman essentially imprisoned in one of Ireland's Magdalen Laundries, gained worldwide attention when it was nominated for four Oscars in 2014. The film is based on the best selling book titled, *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee*, and is only one of dozens of recent films, documentaries, and books dedicated to the same subject matter. However, some believe that the many public representations of the Magdalen Laundries, such as *The Magdalen Sisters*, Phillip Mullan's 2002 movie that first sparked public attention of the Laundries, and *Philomena*, fail to tell the whole story. One of the more controversial voices in this discourse, the New York Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, recently distributed a pamphlet titled "Debunking 'Philomena,'" states, "[*Philomena*] really is a cruel caricature of nuns that is based on half-truths and out-and-out lies" (1).

As tension surrounding the Magdalen Laundries, as well as Church and State involvement in them, has continuously grown over the last couple of decades, many citizens of Ireland and, indeed, the world have started demanding to know the realities behind the phenomenon. In order to help elucidate the details of the controversy—and to begin moving forward in the pursuit of enlightenment—this thesis reviews and

¹ Magdalen Laundries are also often referred to as "Magdalen Asylums." However, for the purposes of this thesis, the term "Magdalen Laundries" will be favored.

explicates several texts that predate what could be deemed Ireland's Magdalen literature, arguing that they constitute réamhscéala, or pre-tales, useful in establishing a genealogy for such influential texts as Patricia Burke Brogan's play *Eclipsed* (1992) and the movies *The Magdalen Sisters* and *Philomena*. The réamhscéal (singular form) is a staple of ancient Irish epic literature: a tale that precedes the core narrative and without which that narrative can stand; but a tale that nonetheless helps enlighten the main action. Before the emergence of the identifiable genre that has come to be known as Magdalen literature, certain authors were already writing on or at least alluding to the matter of women and their institutionalization (whether in fact or in effect). Two major figures, Kate O'Brien and Samuel Beckett, produced novels—*Without My Cloak* and *Murphy*, respectively—that may be counted among the réamhscéala of the Magdalen texts that have been emerging since the early 1990s. There are, of course, many ways to read O'Brien and Beckett, but this thesis aspires to demonstrate an essential connection between them and explicit Magdalene literature

Magdalen Laundries flourished as part of a system of institutions that rose across Ireland after 1922. The Magdalen Laundries, although overseen by the state, were outsourced and run by the church and were designed to house and rehabilitate women who were assumed to be living sexually impure lives. According to the Government of Ireland's investigative report on the Magdalen Laundries, a document that has come to be known as the McAleese Report, from the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 until the last Laundry's closure in 1996, twelve Magdalen Laundries run by four Religious Orders collectively imprisoned 14,607 women in Ireland (159). These women were, at minimum, rumored to be *capable* of lewd acts or thoughts. For many, the facts and

statistics surrounding the Magdalen Laundries only lead to a plethora of questions: among the most common, how did this happen and why did it go undetected for so long? To fully understand and answer these questions, one must first have a firm understanding of the role, dominance, and power held by the Catholic Church in Ireland.

Although Catholicism has been the principal religion for centuries in Ireland, with 84% of all Irish Citizens claiming Catholicism as their religion on a census report as late as 2011(cso.ie/census), throughout the nineteenth and at the turn on the 20th century, the Church gradually worked to increase its control over many aspects of Irish citizens' day-to-day lives until it became the power force seen a few decades before, during, and after the Irish Revolutionary Period². Emmet Larkin, in his book *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism*, claims that prior to the 20th century, the Catholic Church had been laying the groundwork to become "stronger and stronger...by building an imposing establishment in terms of both plant and personnel" (91). The 20th century saw the completion of this Catholic-laid foundation, and "[b]y 1914 Irish and Catholic had not only become interchangeable terms, but Catholic had come to be the inclusive term" (Larkin 91). Individuals under the influence of the Catholic Church feared the wrath of God, as threatened through the Church's personnel, and Catholicism became ingrained and interwoven in their Irish identity, taking over every aspect of each Church members' lives and making sure that its control captured intended targets at an early age: "[By] 1878, the education that existed for Catholics in Ireland was largely controlled by the Church" (Larkin 107). To be a good Irishman or women meant to whole heartedly follow

² The Irish Revolutionary Period is commonly cited as taking place between the years of 1910 and 1922 .The signifying characteristic of the period is a movement of support from Home Rule to the Irish Republic (Sinn Féin).

the rules laid out early on by the Catholic Church, and if these laymen faltered in any way, there was a penalty to be paid.

Establishing appropriate penalties for sin became the task of Church officials very early in the formation of the Catholic Church. According to Tom Inglis, in his book *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society*, the Church's passing down of punishment was just one part of a larger procedure that he calls "The Irish Civilizing Process" (130). As Irish Catholicism began to morph from its pagan-influenced beginnings and take root as a more dominant establishment in the 19th and 20th centuries, the Church embraced exercises that are commonly known as penitential practices. According to Inglis, penitential practices consisted of three primal processes that were implemented regularly during the Irish Catholic Church's 19th-century rise to power:

(1) A terrified (*sic*) system of penance which...became the basis of legalistic mentality which later dominated Western moral practice.

(2) A shift from Canonical, or public confession and penance, to a private relationship between confessor and penitent which increased the power of the priest, and inculcated individual shame and guilt.

(3) An emphasis on celibacy and virginity that made second-class citizens of married people who pursued the ordinary way of life because they did not have a higher calling. (Inglis 130)

According to Inglis, largely, "[t]he penitentials were an attempt to regulate sexual activity among lay persons and to eliminate it from the lives of clerics, monks and nuns" (Inglis 131). Embracing a system that favored penitential practices set the stage for the Catholic

Church's ability to maintain its control through a highly structured and strategic organization that institutionalized, and therefore silenced, all objectors.

As Ireland worked to and eventually gained its sovereignty, an overwhelming movement to distinguish itself from 700-year colonizer, Britain, ensued. Because Ireland had been associated as part of the "British Isles" for eras, an attempt to reclaim that which was indigenous to Ireland started with the antiquarians³ of the 19th century. Not surprisingly, the Catholic Church emerged as a leader in this pursuit to reclaim Ireland for the Irish, and, in a political play for more power, sought to de-Anglicize the Republic. Larkin comments on the overpowering part the Church's demands, including de-Anglicization, played throughout the 19th and 20th century politics of rebellion:

By 1886, then, the British state had lost the great game it had played for so many centuries in Ireland. An Irish state had not only been created in the minds of most Irishmen, but the national and local political apparatus necessary to the functioning of that state was operative... The crucial point to be made here, however, is that the Irish state could not have been made stable before 1886 if the Irish clergy had not been accommodated. If the Irish clergy had not accepted the accommodation when it did, the character of the Irish state would have been a great deal different from what it eventually became. (113)

Part of this de-Anglicization process involved removing those from society who did not meet Church officials' standards for being a "good Catholic." Exerting their tremendous

³ The Royal Society of Antiquaries was established in 1849, receiving its royal charter in 1912. This society vowed "to preserve, examine and illustrate all ancient monuments and memorials of the arts, manners and customs of the past, as connected with the antiquities, language, literature and history of Ireland" (<http://rsai.ie>).

power over Irish Catholic citizens, members of the Church Clergy began building up their system of already established institutions in order to lock away those who did not fit into their Catholic mold. Included in this system of institutions were the twelve elaborately built Magdalen Laundries that soon would begin prospering across Ireland.

Magdalen Laundries originated in Britain in the early 18th century to house “fallen women.” With a growing population of female prostitutes, Britain’s Protestant Church built their Laundries as refuges, ran by laymen, to house these “fallen women” while offering them the chance to emancipate and rehabilitate themselves. According to James M. Smith in his book *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment*, “Protestant Asylums [in England] turned away any girl they did not feel was ‘redeemable’” (26). Britain’s laundries began as a means to help selective women: those whom they believed were capable of being brought back into the faith dictated by the Church of England. Although these original institutions operated under debatable terms, when Magdalen Laundries spilled over into Ireland and were eventually taken over by the Catholic Church, they acquired a different role, a role that later led the Laundries to gather much more contemporary attention and controversy than their predecessors. According to Smith, “While the Catholic religious-run institutions [in Ireland] would continue to operate into the 1990s, the majority of Protestant lay-managed asylums ceased operation by the early twentieth century” (25). The length of their tenure, living conditions of the penitents, as well as the State’s involvement in these Catholic Institutions, culminated in statistical data released after their closure that has, since, been impossible to ignore.

Almost immediately after gaining control, the Catholic Church built large, elaborate buildings to house their penitent women and gave control of the laundries to various orders of nuns. Although these laundries were originally intended to house prostitutes, by the early 20th century, the Catholic Church had broadened its requirements and began admitting any woman who was even rumored to be sexually impure: in thought or action. Admittance into the Magdalen Laundries peaked at two times in Irish history: post-famine and post-independence. Smith claims that the post-famine peak was due to “a moral and spiritual decline in postfamine Irish society” (30), but the later peak was an attempt to ostracize a large group of non-conformist women:

“...these institutions facilitated the removal of a heterogenous group of women in ‘moral danger,’ that is, deemed likely to fall, women of limited intelligence, victims of physical and sexual abuse, women found guilty of certain crimes, and women abandoned to the nuns’ care by family members, employers, and friends.” (Smith 30)

In short, removing the types of women listed above from society was seen as beneficial to the new image the Church wished to portray in the Republic. Although some women were sentenced to live a life in the Laundry by the State or Church, others were forced in by their families and friends, and, for many, a Laundry was often a temporary stop among a series of industrial schools and mental asylums (McAleese Report).

The sisters who ran the institutions preached their belief that they were doing God’s work in the laundry, and they “presumed to offer an environment in which a woman’s spiritual as well as moral welfare would be reclaimed and protected” (Smith 31). The sisters kept close watch over the women, and no one was permitted entrance or

exit, so the majority of outsiders were unaware of the living and working conditions of the penitents. As Smith points out in the subtitle of his book, “*the Nation’s Architecture of Containment*,” even the construction of the Laundries were meant to keep outsiders barred and unaware of what was going on. Laundries were most often built in areas pushed back from main roads or high on hills, surrounded by large fences and gates kept locked unless otherwise noted by a Church Official. When a family member became suspicious or aware of a woman’s sexual misconduct, they felt the spiritual responsibility to turn the perpetrator over to the church for the cleansing of her soul. Because detailed knowledge about the inner-workings of the Laundries was limited, this system remained a productive means for keeping girls imprisoned and maintained positive public perceptions for many decades.

In the early 1990s, largely due to publications by Galway poet and playwright Patricia Burke Brogan, many questions began to be raised in Ireland about the Magdalen Laundries. After much inquiry and demand by Irish citizens, in 2012 the Irish government was forced to launch an eighteen-month investigation into both the state’s involvement in the Magdalen Laundries and the working conditions of the women who lived there. The results of the investigation were written up and published in 2013 in the McAleese Report. The report details the harsh working conditions each penitent endured, working as free labor often up to 18 hours a day. The women were typically forced to spend their days in complete silence, washing clothes and linens as a way of working off their debt to God caused by their “lustful” behavior.

However, most shockingly, the report details the emotional torment many imprisoned women admitted to being a victim of. Most of the emotional trauma was

caused as a result of penitents not being made aware of why they were placed in the laundry. According to the McAleese Report:

The confusion and hurt experienced by these women when placed in a Magdalen Laundry was, undoubtedly, exacerbated by the fact that they had absolutely no idea why they were there. For many of them, this also meant that on leaving the Magdalen Laundry, they were fearful that, for some unknown reason, they might be brought back there again. Some of the women told the Committee that they felt free of this fear only after they left Ireland to live abroad. (931)

The report makes clear that many of the women were forced into a life completely dependent on the Church even after their dismissal from the Laundry. The emotional toll caused by being placed in captivity and forced to work as essential slave labor, left many penitents so compromised that, even after being released, they were unable to function on their own and remained wards of the Church. Although some of the Laundries remained open until the mid-1990s, significant efforts have been made to begin rectifying damages inflicted on both direct and indirect victims of what can only be labeled as a lapse in judgment by the Irish Catholic Church.

At the conclusion of this brief discussion of the Irish Catholic Church and the rise of Magdalen Laundries, a few pertinent questions remain: with a plethora of contemporary literatures surfacing, why did it take close to a century for this amount of attention to be raised about Ireland's Magdalen Laundries? How were those who were speaking out decades before the scandal so effectively silenced? In order to answer these relevant questions, and to begin moving this thesis forward by examining relative

literature, one must briefly look into Irish Censorship Laws as they existed after the establishment of the Republic.

The Republic of Ireland has a long history of censoring published literature, often banning works, including James Joyce's *Ulysses*, that have become embedded in the very Irish identity. Prior to 1929, book censorship fell under legislation began in and carried over from the British Empire and can be publically found listed under "Statutes of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland 1801 to 1922." According to Laine Craig in her article "Passion's Possibilities: Kate O'Brien's Sexological Discourse in *Without My Cloak*," in 1926, shortly following Ireland's independence, a committee, known as the Committee on Evil Literature, was formed that ruled all previous censorship legislation in Ireland insufficient, directly leading to The Censorship of Publications Act, 1929 (Craig 121).

The Censorship of Publication Act of 1929 created a board that immediately began purging Ireland of literature that was "suggestive of, or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave" (Censorship of Pub. Act, 1929, 1). Although this act was not the first of its kind, its inception marked a long-standing tradition of censorship in the Republic of Ireland. Not surprisingly, the Catholic Church had direct influence over the creation of this act. Tom Inglis cites the Censorship Act of 1929 in a list of historical moments "when Church and State [in Ireland] have clashed, and when the Church has become directly involved in State matters" (75). Among more specific matters, the act allowed for the board to ban publications based on "any other matter relating to such book or edition which appears to the Board to be relevant"(Censorship of Pub. Act, 1929, 2). The censorship act relied on

broad definitions and language to put questionable publications almost solely at the discretion of the five board members. The censorship board, which reserved the right to ban any publication they deemed unbeneficial to society, especially targeted those that negatively represented the dominant Catholic Church, including any who dared write a transparent critique of the Catholic-run Magdalen Laundries. Until the last few decades, which have brought about some liberalization of Censorship Laws in Ireland, the authors who managed to publish opinions that could be read as adverse to the Catholic Church, had to do so under the guise of metaphorical language, making widespread knowledge difficult.

Although the Irish State and Church are currently working to find ways to make amends for the actions of those involved with the Magdalen Laundries, many Irish citizens have found themselves caught up in an attempt to assign blame. In an article titled “Sisters who ran Magdalene Laundries are Being Treated Unjustly” published in the March 3, 2014 edition of *The Irish Times*, author Catherine McCann claims that the nuns involved with the running of the Catholic Church have taken far too much blame. The article insists that media coverage of the “sad situation was from the start one-sided and largely hostile towards religious sisters” (McCann). On the other side, an article published in the February 5, 2014 edition of the *Irish Independent* titled “UN Demands That Pope Launches Investigation into Magdalene Laundries” represents the side that claims that the Church has not yet taken enough blame and that “religious orders involved or the Vatican itself [should] pay compensation to survivors and families of victims of the notorious Magdalene laundries” (Independent). While those hurt or otherwise affected by the Magdalen Laundries continue to assign blame, others are

emerging to look for a way to move past the tragedy and begin to heal from it. One important way to bring healing to those affected is pay homage to those who dared to speak out early on against the rise of such institutions. As this thesis unfolds, the writings of three individuals, namely Kate O'Brien, Samuel Beckett, and Patricia Burke Brogan, will be closely examined in an attempt to learn more about past public perceptions of the Magdalen Laundries by those who were willing to write about them.

CHAPTER 2

“Are there fallen women in Mellick?...God help us all!”: The Fate of the Sexually Impure
in Kate O’Brien’s *Without My Cloak*

As Magdalen Laundries and other Catholic-run institutions in the newly formed Republic of Ireland rose, Irish authors in the early 20th century began to write about the living conditions and morality of such social institutions. However, due to Irish censorship laws, these authors were forced to mask their subject matter in covert metaphors. In 1931, Kate O’Brien published her first, and only uncensored, novel, *Without My Cloak*. Her debut novel indirectly addresses concerns about the well being of Catholic women who had no control, inside or out of marriage, over their sexual lives and the morality of institutions, such as the Magdalen Laundries, designed to force “sinful” women to pay penance. In her article titled, “Passion’s Possibilities: Kate O’Brien’s Sexological Discourse in *Without My Cloak*,” Laine Parish Craig posits, “O’Brien avoids any overt narrative... challenge [to] the institution of heterosexual marriage; ...such a challenge would have placed her in direct conflict of the Irish Censorship of Publications Board” (119). This chapter will argue that O’Brien, although working under the threat of censorship, still manages to justify women’s right to dictate their own sexual practices as well as to expose the effects of Irish social institutions on the individual by disclosing the confining nature imposed on those who lived and were treated in what has been described by James Smith in Ireland as “the [n]ation’s [a]rchitecture of [c]ontainment” (1).

With only the first of her nine novels published in the Republic, by the end of Kate O’Brien’s career, she had become known in her home country of Ireland for her provocative writings. O’Brien’s writing often contains sexually explicit scenes and

opinions that could be, and often have been, read as contradictory to the teachings of the early 20th century Irish Catholic Church. O'Brien biographer Eibhear Walshe, in his book *Kate O'Brien, A Wring Life*, describes each of her novels as, "a Trojan horse smuggling in forbidden topics, such as adultery, lesbianism and venereal disease through the medium of her civilized, graceful narratives" (2); however, he also admits that O'Brien's aggressive discourse was much more carefully hidden in her first novel, and she only obtained her "growing confidence as a professional writer" after its publication (60). Many Irish Catholics were "outraged" as O'Brien dared to "invent her own version of Irish Catholicism in her novels where individual conscience and personal choice on moral issues was possible" (Walshe 50). According to Tom Inglis, for those who followed the teaching of the church, "it [was only] permissible for a Catholic to follow his or her conscience as long as it [was] guided by Church principles and [did] not contravene any specific regulation" (29). It is important to note that, although it remained unbanned in Ireland, *Without My Cloak* is equally as confrontational as O'Brien's later novels; however, her controversial discourse, like the conversation she raises about the fate of unwed mothers, is concealed within the sophisticated language of the novel.

Without My Cloak is a generational novel that follows the Considine family line of descent from father to son for four generations, beginning with the family's patriarch, a horse thief who rides into Mellick⁴ in the late 18th century. The family manages to build their reputation within Mellick, and they quickly become one of the most wealthy and respected families in the area. The family claims that they have always been "proud to be

⁴ Mellick is often read as representative of O'Brien's hometown of Limerick, located in Co. Limerick, Ireland. According to Walshe, "Limerick was known at this time as a place of deep Catholic fervor..." (15).

Catholic [even] in days when that was not easy” (O’Brien 15). Central to the novel, from the opening chapter, is a heavy discourse on sexuality, especially the repression of women’s sexuality by the Catholic Church. Throughout the novel, “numerous references [are made] to children, parents, [and] childbearing... reveal[ing] O’Brien’s insertion of the language of a 1920s reproductive ideology into an Irish family romance set in the nineteenth century” (Craig 125). In addition to the denial of the right to participate in sexual relationships outside of marriage, although it was often considered taboo to even speak of, debates surrounding the Church’s stance on a woman’s right to prevent pregnancy through contraceptives emerged as a highly scandalous topic during the time O’Brien was writing *Without My Cloak*. According to Inglis, by denying women, not only the spiritual freedom to use, but also the legal rights to obtain contraceptives, “the Church sought to impose on marriage and sexual practices... [changes which prompted] an interest in instilling shame and guilt about the body” (140). Kathryn Conrad observes in her book *Locked in the Family Cell: Gender, Sexuality, and Political Agency in Irish National Discourse*, “women who did not fit the prescribed social roles [imposed by the Church] bore the brunt of regulatory practices and punishments” (5). In an attempt to create a large subtext about the trouble with limiting female control over sexual practices, O’Brien works to overtly saturate her novel with language centered on childbearing. In addition, she subtly includes references to Magdalen Laundries and Institutions as the plot builds, culminating in a tragic scene depicting the fate of a woman who dares to participate in sexual relations outside of marriage and revealing O’Brien’s willingness to comment on the morality of Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries.

Although the novel does not candidly condemn the Magdalen Laundries, from the novel's opening section, O'Brien directly puts the image of these specific institutions in her readers' awareness. At the beginning of the novel, Anthony, the favorite son of living-patriarch Honest John Considine, invites his father and siblings to have dinner at the newly built home of his and his wife, Molly. When all the guests have arrived, the fixed narration circles the table, presenting each family member individually from Anthony's point of view. When Anthony's brother Father Tom, a prideful priest who is "fanatical" about watching over the sexual morality of Mellick's citizens, is introduced, the narration says, "Anthony was not interested in Tom's purity mission, but sometimes...he liked to start him on his hobby horse" (O'Brien 36). When Anthony playfully pushes Father Tom into talking about his newest "hobby," it becomes known that the Church has begun collecting money for a special project in Mellick. When questioned about why the church is taking up an additional collection, Tom tries to avoid answering:

"...And what was his lordship begging for this time?" [said Anthony.]

"There was a notice in every church porch." Tom seemed to wish to leave it at that. But the table obviously expected him to go on. His colour mounted.

"The money is needed to found a refuge for fallen women," he said courageously...

"Are there fallen women in Mellick?" asked Anthony, ignoring a grimace from Molly.

“God help us all!” Prayed Sophia, who sat on charity committees and was the wife of Dr. Joe Considine. (O’Brien 37)

Father Tom has just reluctantly, but boldly, informed his family that the Church intends to build a Magdalen Laundry in Mellick. Although the novel does not return to this conversation or track the progression of the building process of the Magdalen Laundry, the importance of this quick scene is, nonetheless, rendered significant as the novel progresses. When Father Tom helps decide the fate of a woman he believes capable of committing a sexual sin, in one of the novel’s culminating scenes, the possibility of there being a Laundry in Mellick should persist in the reader’s awareness. Furthermore, throughout the remaining portions of the novel, metaphorical language is used to repeatedly suggest the construct of institutions in which many of the characters find themselves living in and falling victim to.

The first and most dominant of such metaphorical institutions is the massive home built by Anthony Considine. Like Honest John, Anthony too has a favorite child, his first-born son, Denis. For Denis, Anthony constructs River Hill, a large home to serve as the family’s status symbol: “It was for Denis that he built this house that Molly said she did not want and that the family in general considered an extravagance”(O’Brien 32). A large portion of the novel takes place in or around River Hill, as Anthony’s family goes through many changes, and the house, itself, takes on an important role in the text.

Shortly after the house is introduced, it becomes associated with Molly’s death. Molly, essentially, dies as a result of a lack of birth control. Because of the Catholic Church’s stance on contraception, that preventing pregnancy is a sin, Anthony and Molly refuse to use birth control. After bearing eight children, Molly’s health has been

continuously declining, causing Anthony to proceed in an effort to limit his sexual experiences with her. However, despite his attempts, Molly still ends up pregnant with a ninth child. When he learns of the pregnancy, Anthony immediately feels grief stricken and replies, “Oh, my little girl...I am sorry for that” (O’Brien 115). However, Molly’s body cannot endure another pregnancy, and both she and the child die in River Hill. Anthony’s passionate cry is heard echoing through the home: “At thirty-four you’re dead. At thirty-four! Because of me—because I loved you!” (O’Brien 122). However, it is not Anthony who has killed his wife; rather, Molly is dead, as Craig positions, because of “the patriarchal, repressive culture that curtails [Anthony] as well as his wife’s options for sexual fulfillment” (129). From that point forward, Molly’s ghost continues to metaphorically haunt the house: even ten years after her death, when the family gathered once more at River Hill, the narration says, “The year’s first daffodils swayed as gaily from the epergne as if Molly’s long-closed eyes were still there to flatter them” (O’Brien 203). It is hard to read the text without recognizing the forced connection between River Hill and Molly’s Death, and therefore River Hill and the woes of female sexuality as defined by the Catholic Church.

It is only after Molly’s death, that River Hill fully emerges as a controlling institution. The language used in the novel seems to suggest that the house imposes itself on the Considine family: “The ladies of the house formed the habit of calling at River Hill...and acquainted themselves through [Agnes] with most of the details of the household” (O’Brien 124). In an attempt to help Anthony after Molly’s death, the women of the family take over the duties associated with running the household, but because of the house’s size, the many responsibilities begin to overtake all of the women and they

find themselves *all* busy with the basic running order of the single home (O'Brien 124-5). The entire Considine family essentially falls victim to River Hill's demands, demands that only need to be met because of Molly's untimely death.

In addition, as time passes, River Hill emerges as an institution that houses and represents the conservative side of the Considine family. An obvious rift emerges in the family, separating those who begin to accept a liberal way of life from those who hold steadfastly to rules and regulations dictated by the Catholic Church. Walshe characterizes Eddy, Caroline, and Denis Considine as "the dissenters and rebels within the family," leaving Anthony, Father Tom, and Teresa Considine as "upholders of the communal family ethos" (52). Over the course of the novel, all three "dissenters," manage to, for various amounts of time, escape the constricting nature of the family by leaving River Hill. However, only Eddy, who creates a life for himself in London, manages to become permanently excluded from the family's morality clause. Although she escapes an unwanted marriage for a short time, Caroline ultimately remains confined by her gender, unable to wholly support herself outside of the family's provision. Until well into the novel, when he gains agency through age, Denis cannot manage to even temporarily flee River Hill; yet, he does show signs of opposition early on.

Molly's death changes Denis dramatically: "The death of his mother took childishness from Denis" (O'Brien 126). Although Denis is only fourteen at the time of his mother's death, the events surrounding her passing intensely resonate with him, especially his father's reaction to her death: the narrator claims that Denis is less shocked by the physical manifestation of his mother's death and the subsequent ceremonies than he is by, for the first time, witnessing "unhappiness in his father" (O'Brien 126). As

depicted in the second half of the novel, the metaphorical value in Molly's death, that of the results of Catholic repression of the sexual rights of females, takes a toll in Denis's development, and he becomes determined to never fall victim to the social constructs that directly cause his parents' tragedy. However, before he can fully rebel, Denis must first continue to come of age through the remaining portion of the first half of the novel. As Denis grows, he develops a consciousness "of life's confusing contrasts of good and evil, pleasure and pain" (O'Brien 126). The more Denis observes, the further he distances himself from the overpowering nature of River Hill and the more time he invests in an unusual hobby for a boy of his age and birth: gardening.

Directly after his mother's death, Denis begins working in the garden surrounding River Hill: "...the latest trouble about Denis was that he was taken with a craze of gardening, a craze which, in the form in which he developed it, was unknown among young gentleman of his class in Mellick in the year of 1870" (O'Brien 134). This hobby allows Denis to leave the confines of the house without fully separating himself from the restrictions of the property. Gardening becomes a metaphor for the beginning of Denis's dissent from the moral confines represented by the family. Gardening as a metaphor works in two ways in the novel: firstly, Denis breaks societal boundaries dictated by his birth by participating in a pastime that does not fit the mold of how a young, wealthy Irish boy typically occupied his time in the late 19th century. Gardening would have been seen as the responsibility of the Considine family's employees, and the novel makes no effort to conceal the defiant nature of this act: "Instead of directing the gardener, [Denis] took off his coat with him and asked his advice...His uncles and aunts were horrified..." (O'Brien 135). Secondly, and most importantly, Denis is beginning to free himself from

the institution represented by River Hill in the novel. Denis's personal time is now being spent in a liminal space; he is no longer in the home, but he still remains trapped within the margins of the family's property, and therefore moral space.

When Denis turns 18, he is, for the first time, given the opportunity to fully escape River Hill by going on a three-month trip across Europe. The trip culminates in a short visit to see his Uncle Eddy in London. While there, Eddy claims to recognize a difference in Denis that separates him from the rest of their family: "...you aren't a Considine at all, except by the narrowest of accident. Some streak that ran thinly in your mother has come out in a vengeance in you" (O'Brien 244). Eddy proceeds over dinner to urge Denis to leave the Considine Family:

If you live among Considines, making their life and interest yours, you'll do so out of unconvinced affection—your personality will be wounded, exasperated, and insulted even, every week of the year—all the more so because the family feels this sort of hiatus between you and them and resent it—and resent too that they are fond of you in spite of it. Just as you will resent your affection for them and your sudden, unlawful sympathies with them. (O'Brien 245).

Denis ponders Eddy's plea on his way home, and as soon as he is reunited with his father, he realizes "How right Uncle Eddy had been!" (O'Brien 247). However, it is not until he and his father approach River Hill that Denis fully realizes how constricting living back in Mellick will be:

Denis stared when Anthony pointed, first at one symbol, then at another [as they approached River Hill]... They were all his enemies, all these—

they were tradition, conformity, conservatism—they were values that were not his, they were pride and funny pomp and the will of others... (O'Brien 248).

Anxiety ensues as Denis listens and watches his father point out the family's symbols—ciphers that, instead of binding him closer to, only alienate Denis from the rest of the Considine family. The scene and chapter culminate as the father and son make their final approach and River Hill comes into view. At this moment in the text, Denis's new found rebellious spirit literally clashes with the novel's physical manifestation of conservatism, River Hill, ensuing in conflict throughout the remaining portions of the novel.

Not surprisingly, Denis's dissent from the rest of the family is broadened through his rejection of the Church's teachings about sexual conduct. Not unlike his fascination with gardening, a hobby considered beneath his birth, Denis peruses the love of Christina Roche, an illegitimate woman living with her exceptionally poor aunt. As Denis and Christina foster their love and cross religious boundaries through sexual misconduct, the novel's subliminal agenda to defend the sexual rights of women is furthered. In addition, the young couple's forbidden relationship reintroduces Father Tom as a central character and, with him, the awareness of Magdalen Laundries.

For the second time in the novel, an edifice, specifically a home becomes reminiscent of a social institution. Christina's mother died in childbirth, leaving her illegitimate daughter in the care of her sister. Although she has had several occasions to leave her aunt's care, through opportunities to work or join the church, Christina consistently is forced to return to her childhood home due to unforeseen circumstances. This small, ramshackle home stands in physical opposition to River Hill, the dominant

structure in the first portion of the narrative. Nonetheless, like River Hill, Christina's aunt's home becomes a dominant force, entrapping Christina, despite the fact that her father is the second son of a great house, in her illegitimate legacy.

When Christina is first introduced, the narrator reveals that she grew up with the awareness that she had very little chance for upward mobility. Her aunt, Bridget, constantly reminds her that she is illegitimate, will probably never get married, and that her only real shot at sustainability is for her to leave Ireland and begin a new life abroad. However, Christina comments that she would "sooner die" than leave Ireland (O'Brien 292). Although she does not indulge herself in fantasies of marriage or splendor, Christina does wish for an escape from her aunt's home, but her every attempt is thwarted by fate, and she consistently finds herself back in the home in which she started.

Although the metaphorical presence of the inability for Christina to rise above societal rank, as represented by her aunt's home, is a strong presence in Christina and Denis's story, the physical absence of the home throughout their relationship is striking. The couple only meets up away from the home, and despite Denis's attempts to join Christina at her aunt's house, she refuses to allow him to visit, and she seems to constantly be pulled back to the edifice by the fear of her aunt's reaction if she were to find out about Denis. In the midst of spending an idealistic day together, Christina suddenly realizes she must go home, and like Cinderella at midnight, a resilient force seems to be pulling her there:

"I'll catch it this time from Aunt Bridget."

"Oh, Christina—let me come with you."

"Indeed then I won't. Is it make bad worse?...Good-night to you now"

“No, no, no Christina. Not yet I say!”...”No, not good-night I tell you!”...

“Good-night now. Do you hear me—good night! Oh, Denis—I can’t stay any longer!”

It was the first time he heard her say his name—and he cried out on it.

But with the ceasing of their two voices she was gone. (O’Brien 301)

Christina is aware that Denis does not fit into her world, and, by not allowing him to come to her house, she is attempting to keep the two separate. The force that continuously pulls Christina away from Denis and back into *her* world is the novel’s representation of societal expectations. These expectations cannot allow for Christina to rise above her birthright by fostering a relationship with Denis. Despite Christina’s efforts, her two worlds cannot stay separate for long, colliding as Denis eventually gains access to her aunt’s house. However, Denis arrives too late, society has already taken its toll, and Christina has fallen victim to the repercussions for her and Denis’s actions.

After being stood up for several days in a row by Christina, Denis ventures to her aunt’s house to locate her. Unbeknownst to Denis, his uncle, Father Tom has been made alert of his and Christina’s association. Because Father Tom is unaware that the young couple has already consummated their relationship, he immediately grows concerned that Denis and Christina will begin participating in sexual misconduct. As a result, he devises a plan to prevent Denis from continuing his relationship with Christina. When Denis enters Bridget’s home, although he is not physically there, Father Tom’s presence is very much alive within the house. Denis endures the news that Father Tom made Bridget aware of the forbidden relationship. Bridget refuses to believe that Denis is willing to

marry Christina, calling her “a living blot of sin” and proclaiming that, if they continue their relationship and it ends in an illegitimate pregnancy, she will not endure anymore “nameless brats put on [her] hands” (O’Brien 347). As Denis stands under distress in Christina’s aunts house for the first time, the connection between the house and the inability of those who inhabit it to move forward is reinforced: “Strength was gone from him. He stood in the darkness, without will or purpose, in this house that had been Christina’s home...Clearly there was no hope here...He must go elsewhere” (O’Brien 348). The novel’s diction seems to suggest that the house, itself, possesses the ability to remove all hopefulness from those who occupy it.

Denis starts to leave Bridget’s house to go in search of answers about Christina’s whereabouts. Suspense builds as Christina’s cousin, John, rushes out of the house and presents Denis with a letter. At this moment in the text, one would expect to receive the news that Christina has been sent to Mellick’s Magdalen Laundry. In this culminating scene, connections between the construction of the Magdalen Laundry ten years prior, subtexts about the penalty women pay for sexual misconduct, and the abundant images of overbearing institutions falsely collide as Denis pushes John for more information before reading the letter. Because John can offer nothing useful, Denis opens the letter that, distressingly, reveals Christina has been sent abroad instead of placed in a Laundry. However, most shockingly, Christina writes that Father Tom “wasn’t unkind at all” (O’Brien 351), a phrase that troubles Denis, who now sees his uncle as a “Devil” (O’Brien 353). Denis rushes off in pursuit of Father Tom.

Denis gets the chance to question Father Tom, but only after the news of his relationship with Christina has been made known to the whole Considine family. Father

Tom asserts that he was doing both Christina and Denis a kindness: as he sees it, Christina gets to start a new life away from her illegitimate past, Denis is saved from a public “slur” (O’Brien 363), and they both have been prevented from committing a sexual deviance against God and the Church. As Denis verbally grieves for his loss of Christina, Father Tom maintains his position, stating that Christina admitted to having no claim over his nephew, and only breaking support for his steadfast judgment when he learns the truth of the sexual nature of Denis and Christina’s relationship: “Christina has every possible claim on me, and I on her! I am her lover, do you hear? ...Her lover in the sense that you call sinful!” (O’Brien 371). As the shock of this confession resonates across the room full of listening Considines, Father Tom immediately feels grief stricken and regrets his decision, revealing why he originally chose not to place Christina in a Magdalen Laundry: “Had Christina let him understand that she had given herself to Denis, he would have regarded her...as an ‘unfortunate woman,’ a ‘fallen woman,’ and...he would have applied himself to the business of her protection and reformation” (O’Brien 373). Although Father Tom believes that placing her in a Laundry would be the appropriate way to bring Christina back into redemption, and he finds it difficult to look at his nephew, who he now knows to be “deep-soaked in sin of the flesh” (O’Brien 373), the text faintly challenges any assertion that either Denis or Christina’s actions were wrong or deserving of penance.

In her letter to Denis, Christina claims, “When I am with you I can see no sin in either of us, and even this minute I cannot feel sorry for what we did” (O’Brien 351). When Christina is sent abroad, forced to pay for the very actions that she could not feel remorseful for “the pain in her heart was so great that it [stifled] her...instantly and most

happily [destroyed] her...and she was somehow dead, numbed of thought and feeling” (O’Brien 400). While in New York, Christina withers away, becoming but a skeleton of who she once was and consumed with self-hatred. Ten-weeks after Christina leaves Ireland, Denis travels and finds her in New York and, again, confesses his love for her. However, because she knows that she will not survive the pain if she allows him reentrance into her life and ever has to lose him again, Christina rejects Denis and sends him back to Ireland. Although Denis eventually marries an appropriate woman by societal standards, Anna Hennesy, he never ceases to stop dreaming of Christina and wondering what would have become of their relationship if Father Tom had not intervened.

At the conclusion of the novel, readers, like Denis, are left wondering what might have become of the young couple’s love had they never been forced apart. Although Father Tom misguidedly offers Christina an alternative to a life imprisoned in a Magdalen Laundry, is the outcome any better? O’Brien’s novel seems to suggest that by oppressing women and denying them their sexual freedom, Catholic practices are both literally and metaphorically killing women. The blame for Molly’s death has to lie with her inability to use birth control. Caroline’s youthful nature and free spirit is stifled by being unable to divorce her husband and forced to remain in the Institution-like River Hill, which is bursting with conservative ideologies. And, finally, quick witted and beautiful Christina, has all semblance of life drained from her spirit in an alleged act of humanity from Father Tom who, supposedly, “wasn’t unkind at all” (O’Brien 351).

CHAPTER 3

“Any fool can turn a blind eye, but who knows what the ostrich sees in the sand?”:

Exposing the Immorality of Irish Social Institutions in Beckett’s *Murphy*

Institutions play a large role in Samuel Beckett’s first published novel, *Murphy*.

The title character is initially introduced to the text while inhabiting a small, rented space in London that is on the verge of being condemned. Murphy, an Irishman, has fled to England in an attempt to escape an unwanted marriage. Murphy is happiest when he is inhabiting an abstract institution—alone, tied up naked in a rocking chair, and able to retreat into his own mind: “...life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word” (Beckett 2). However, because Murphy cannot live solely in the self-created institution of his mind, he is forced to spend time in reality and forms a recurring sexual relationship with a prostitute. It is this relationship that leads Murphy to accept a job at the tangible representation of institutions in the novel, the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, sparking the novel’s connection to Irish institutions, specifically Magdalen Laundries and Mental Asylums. This chapter will argue that *Murphy*’s portrayal of the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat is grounded in historical fact and should be read as a commentary on the horrendous conditions faced by those living in Irish Social Institutions.

The morality of patient treatment in Irish Institutions was an interest first sparked in Beckett’s personal life. According to biographer Enoch Brater in his book *The Essential Samuel Beckett: An Illustrated Biography*, “The novel we read today reflects, in part, Beckett’s experiences [while undergoing mental treatment]” (35). In 1934, Beckett began exploring psychological treatments as a means of management for anxiety connected with his father’s death. Beckett spent two years under the care of psychiatrist

W.R. Bion, where *Murphy* was first conceptualized. Brater observes, “*Murphy* urges us to consider...the environs of the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat...” (35). Through Murphy’s interactions and observations while working at the M.M.M., the reader is invited to glimpse into the inner working of institutions, specifically those that were in abundance in Ireland. Before explicating the M.M.M.’s conditions, the fictional asylum must first be situated as allegorical for actual institutions specifically in Ireland.

Although it is technically set in England, the M.M.M., is positioned as existing in a liminal space that becomes representative of Ireland. *Murphy* is an intensely Irish text. According to John P. Harrington in his book *The Irish Beckett*, *Murphy* is a “critique of modern Ireland” (87), and the novel contains names and caricatures of people in contemporary Irish news who were involved in a public, high profile court case. Harrington states, “The London setting in *Murphy*...is an opportunity for commentary on Ireland by contrast and by caricature of Irish types and manners removed from natural and habitual habitat” (91). Victoria Stevens points out in her article, “Nothingness, No-Thing, and Nothing in the Work of Wilfred Bion and in Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy*”, that the title of the novel was chosen because it was the most common surname in Ireland at the time Beckett was writing (623). Rubin Rabinovitz, in his article, “*Murphy* and the Uses of Repetition,” positions the M.M.M. as counterpoint to another institution located in Ireland, St. John O’ God’s mental asylum in Stillorgan, Co. Dublin. John O’ God’s is mentioned in the fourth chapter of the novel, well before Murphy ever begins working at the M.M.M. Although it may be positioned as a double for John O’God’s, the M.M.M. is not in Ireland, just as it is not, truly, in London. The institution exists on its “own grounds” (Beckett 95). However, because of *Murphy*’s many historically contemporary

Irish connections it is safe to assume that the M.M.M. is set up as a representation for institutions in Ireland.

Because the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat is designated in the novel as a mental asylum, it is not, but by careful reading, also easily discernable as a representation of Irish Magdalen Laundries. Textual evidence reveals that the commentary on the living conditions of Irish institutions, represented in the novel by the M.M.M., should be extended to include Magdalen Laundries. Most obviously, the M.M.M. partially shares its name with Ireland's institutions for sexually deviant females. The first word in the name of both institutions is "Magdalen," an allusion to the biblical figure, Mary Magdalene, a character widely known for being a reformed prostitute. However, most importantly, like many Irish women who were forced to pay penance, the fictional Murphy enters the Magdalen Institution as a result of his participation in a sexual relationship outside of wedlock.

Murphy's relationship with Celia, a London prostitute pushed into the business after the death of her parents, is predicated on the fact that he is unable to form meaningful connections in a normal capacity and she is willing to force an interaction. Celia, who is pursuing financial stability, unlike in typical man-woman relations, pursues Murphy. When the couple first meets, Murphy stands "arrested...[gazing] at Celia" (Beckett 9) while Celia "[accosts] him in form...[and] they [walk] off together happily arm-in-arm" (Beckett 10). Murphy cannot organically interact with others, so any relationship he becomes a participant in has to form as a result of an outside force, like Celia's willingness to become the pursuing party.

Murphy's indiscretions with Celia lead him to accept a position within the M.M.M.. Early in the novel, Celia offers the unemployed Murphy an ultimatum: find a job in order to offer financial support *or* she will continue down her career path and will no longer be a willing participant in their relationship. Murphy, in an attempt to save his relationship and to redeem his lover from her less than honorable occupation, begins the search for a job: "Celia said that if he did not find work at once she would have to go back to hers" (Beckett 46). For Celia's sake, Murphy begins living in and working as a male nurse at the M.M.M.. Given that Magdalen Laundries were traditionally havens designed for the redemption of English prostitutes, because of the circumstances surrounding the introduction of the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat into the novel, a connection can and should be made between Magdalen Laundries and the institution featured in the novel. The ironic humor of the novel is apparent when Murphy is forced to enter the institution that stands a representation of Magdalen Laundries by a prostitute.

Although the connection between the M.M.M. and Magdalen Laundries is astute, it also serves the purposes of this chapter and thesis to recognize its obvious association with Irish Mental Asylums. Unlike *Without My Cloak*, this novel does not assert the rights of sexually liberal women, its objective, however, is to draw attention to the effects of Irish institutionalization in general by creating an establishment that can be read as representative of two dominant types of institutions that were in abundance in 20th century Ireland, Magdalen Laundries and Mental Asylums. By not limiting the M.M.M. as a depiction of one particular kind of institution, the novel is opening the metaphorical language up to several interpretations. The M.M.M. does not stand for one institution, but for institutionalization in general.

According to Mary Raftery in her documentary title *Behind the Walls*, in the mid-20th century, Ireland, an island consisting of only 32,595 square miles (or approximately the size of the state of Indiana), was home to twenty-five mental institutions, which together housed over 20,000 patients. These patients were often imprisoned and forced to undergo experimental treatments. What happened within mental institutions was often unknown, and the staff was obligated not to talk about it to the public (Raftery). As institutions popularized, different forms of psychological treatment emerged for those who were entrenched within. According to Raftery, “[r]ight throughout the middle decade of the 20th century, Ireland led the world in locking up more of its people per capita in psychiatric institutions than anywhere else in the world” (*Behind the Walls*). The environment of 20th century Irish mental institutions has recently gained public attention, and the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions of these asylums are surprising. Most patients were involuntarily brought to the institutions, and could often expect to stay a few decades or until death. According to Raftery, institutions became the dumping grounds for Irish social problems. Many inmates were either mentally damaged by one of the world wars or compromised in a way that their family deemed embarrassing, similar to women brought into Magdalen Laundries. Not surprisingly, the Irish Catholic Church maintained some control over these state-run institutions. According to historians McCabe and Mulholland in their article, “The Red Flag Over the Asylum: The Monaghan Asylum Soviet of 1919”, when managing committees were formed in 1898 to oversee the procedures for the running of insane asylums, “the committees were dominated by the clergy...” (24). However, despite the Church’s interest, patients were

often subjected to horrendous conditions while seeking care in Ireland's mental institutions.

According to Raftery, when descending the physical levels of mental institutions, the sanitation became increasingly worse, and patients with the poorest psychological health were housed closest to the bottom. Towards the top of the building, where patients with less serious cases were kept, rooms were nicer, and the patient's cost of living in the institutions increased. It became common belief in Ireland that patients who lived in upper-level rooms were often attempting to escape societal problems by hiding out among the insane. However, as you drew closer to the ground floor, "the cases tended to be more serious...until finally one came to the basement where the worst cases were kept. They were a subterranean group who very often did not see the light of day" (Raftery). Management practices in these asylums typically reflected the business plan that yielded the most profit, ignoring sanitation and adequate living conditions for those who did not significantly increase revenue. Many of the more severe and less lucrative patients were forced to give up their basic rights to proper medical treatment in pursuit of experimental practices.

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, most home, or folk, remedies previously used to treat mental illness in Ireland were abandoned, and asylums entered their early stages in pursuit of new, experimental cures for the mentally deranged. Patients underwent novel forms of treatments, such as being forced to purge their food after eating. Another popular treatment, especially in Cork, placed a patient in a cage and rotated it at fast velocities in hopes to shake the illness out of the "lunatic" (Raftery). Although many of the treatments practiced within the confines of these asylums would,

today, be considered in violation of human rights, their popularity among the Irish only increased in the first half of the 20th century. Institutions became so popular in the East of Ireland, that a phrase emerged in the West: a popular version of what would commonly be quoted as “it will drive you mad,” literally translates from Gaelic as “it will drive you East” towards the mental institutions (Raftery). As the number of these institutions increased, so did their economical benefit to their surrounding area, employing around 700 people in Ireland alone (McCabe and Mulholland 25). *Murphy* rises out of the escalation in popularity of these morally questionable institutions in Ireland.

When the narrator first describes Murphy’s job at the M.M.M, a list of his daily tasks is given. As Murphy proceeds to learn about his new job, the novel subtly questions both the ability of nurses to complete their job description and the supposed benevolent intentions of the staff at the M.M.M.. Murphy is assigned daily ten-hour workdays that consist of the following responsibilities:

He would be expected to make beds, carry trays, clean up regular messes, clean up casual messes, read thermometers, write charts, wash the bedridden, give medicine, hound down its effects, warm bedpans, cool fevers, boil gags, sterilize when in doubt, honour and obey the male sister, wait hand, foot and mouth on the doctor when he came, look pleasant.
(Beckett 96)

Murphy’s list of obligations seems impossible when considering he is expected to maintain a seventy-hour workweek. After listing these duties, the narrator says, “The patients seeing so much of their nurses and so little of their doctor, it was natural that they should regard the former as their persecutors and the latter as their saviors” (158). Here,

the novel acknowledges the popular viewpoint in Irish society that nurses were cruel to their patients, but it also suggests that, if they were cruel, it is due to the immense amount of responsibilities they were expected to complete. According to McCabe and Mulholland, the staff in mental asylums were almost always overworked, and “[t]he heavy dangerous work and the poor pay meant that there were always problems with recruitment” (25). In the midst of listing off Murphy’s instructions, one set of directions stand in contrast to the other, overbearing daily tasks: “He would never on any account be rough with a patient. Restraint and coercion were sometimes unavoidable, but must always be exerted with the utmost tenderness...After all it was a mercyseat” (Beckett 96). Although the institution provides a domineering job description for its employees, Murphy is instructed to treat patients with tenderness and care. This rule gives the illusion of a shining moment of humanity pertaining to patient care, but it is rarely followed by staff members at the M.M.M. and is seen broken in particular by male nurse, Tickpenny.

When Ticklepenny is first introduced to the novel, the narrator depicts him as a “creature [who] does not merit any particular description” (Beckett 85). However, despite the lack of a physical illustration, the novel draws attention to Ticklepenny’s nationality: he is an *Irish* poet “From the County of Dublin” (Beckett 84). According to Robert Harrsion, “Ticklepenny is a garden-variety comic Irishman” (63). It is only after Ticklepenny’s nationality is well established that the novel reveals his occupation as one of the M.M.M.’s male nurses. Ticklepenny performs his job duties at the institutions in less than conventional ways. Ticklepenny says, “I sit on those that will not eat...jacking their jaws apart with a gag, spurning their tongues aside with a spatula, till the last

tundish of drench is absorbed. I go round the cells with my shovel and bucket, I---” (Beckett 52). Then narrator then comments, “It is hard to say where the fault lies in the case of Ticklepenny, whether with the soul, the stream or the lips, but certainly the quality of his speech was wretched” (Beckett 53). Ticklepenny hardly treats the patients with the tenderness and care that Murphy is instructed to exercise. It is never explicitly stated that other nurses willingly participate in Ticklepenny’s methods for patient care, but it can be assumed that this is not unusual behavior. Ticklepenny is not being asked to leave the M.M.M. due to his cruel patient treatment, but, on the contrary, the supervising staff protests his resignation. Murphy is brought in as Ticklepenny’s replacement, but, until it is certain that he will prove an adequate addition, Ticklepenny’s pay is not released and he is forced to remain housed in the institution. In fact, Ticklepenny is depicted as a model staff member by the M.M.M.’s supervising team.

Murphy’s supervisors while working at the M.M.M. are identical twins Thomas “Bim” and Timothy “Bom” Clinch. Although Bim and Bom initially seem as if they have both the patients’ best interest at heart and the hospital’s staff under control, nothing could be further from the truth. According to Ackerley and Gontarski in *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, characters, Bim and Bom first appear in Beckett’s fiction in *More Pricks Than Kicks*, and are caricatures of “Russian clowns of the 1920s and ‘30s permitted under the Soviet regime but who became for [Beckett] emblems of cruelty under a comic garb” (56). In *Murphy*, Bim and Bom are portrayed as aggressive and heartless. Both Bim and Bom are abrasive with Murphy as he struggles to learn and master all of his responsibilities. The twins are easily, and often without probable cause, pushed into moments of rage. Probably most telling is the eccentric method, created by

Bom, of making sure all patients are accounted for during the night. A patient being both alive and present is crucial to Bim and Bom, because if they are not, it would cost the institution the weekly money brought in as payment for care. Each staff member is required to make regular rounds during the night in order to ensure the presence of every patient. During rounds, the staff member is to “depress a switch before each [patient’s] door, flooding the cell with light of such ferocity that the eyes of the sleeping and waking closed respectively” (Beckett 142). Patients are subjected to this harsh action at least once every twenty minutes during the night, and the mentally compromised individual who does not meet Bom’s behavioral standard during the day is “liable to get hell at night” (Beckett 142). The narrator says that Bom, the man partially in control of running the mercyseat, is “what is vulgarly called a sadist and encourage[es] what is vulgarly called sadism in his assistants” (Beckett 142). Through the harsh portrayal of both staff members and supervisors at the M.M.M., by extension the novel calls into question the integrity of the leadership within Irish social institutions.

As historians unpack the realities of 20th century Irish mental institutions, the novel’s portrayal of the M.M.M.’s managing staff begins to transcend fiction, and comparisons can be drawn between Bim and Bom’s management techniques and how asylums were now known to be ran. According to McCabe and Mulholland, as early as “the late nineteenth century, medical superintendents exercised almost total control over the day-to-day lives of both patients and staff” (23). Regularly, superintendents made life so difficult for patient and staff alike that “attendants revolted again and again...often displaying great bitterness towards the medical men who sought to control their lives” (24). Supervisors were obsessed with the regulation of their institutions and rarely

allowed staff members or patients to have any agency, leading Gillian McClelland to argue in her article “*Speedwell Magazine: An Insider View of Holywell Psychiatric Hospital, Antrim, 1959-1973,*” that Psychiatric hospitals in “Ireland during the early decades of the twentieth century were places of confinement rather than of treatment and care” (44). As Bim and Bom rule their staff and wards with “ferocity that put[s] Murphy’s heart across him” (Beckett 102), it is not hard to imagine such characters existing among the abundance of non-fictional Asylums in Ireland.

As the narrator lists Murphy’s requirements to live and work in the M.M.M., the last rule stands out as the most important: “He would never on any account neglect to keep his mouth shut. The mercies of the Mercy-seat were private and confidential” (Beckett 97). Although the psychological methods used by the doctors at the M.M.M are never fully explained, the text subtly hints to the administration of experimental treatments which only further compromise the health of the patient. The novel refers to patients’ treatments in the M.M.M. as “therapeutic voodoo” (Beckett 142). Maybe most shocking, however, is the assertion that in order to maintain the M.M.M.’s status as a sanitarium rather than a madhouse, the institution would often have to dismiss a patient from care after “the effect of treatment was to render the prognosis hopeless, as was sometimes bound to happen even in the M.M.M. (Beckett 97). This line implies that after receiving treatment, many patients were mentally compromised in such a manner that they were no longer suited to stay in the M.M.M., an institution for the “better-class mentally deranged” (Beckett 52). Although the text never gives explicit medical detail, its diction begs the question, exactly what are the secret “mercies of the Mercy-seat” (Beckett 97)? Given the supporting evidence suggesting the inner workings of the

M.M.M. be read as a commentary on Irish institutionalization, the novel is probably referring to the factual unconventional treatment options being practiced that were not “curing patients but [were] adding to their problems” (McClelland 46). Although the novel lacks descriptions of specified patient treatment plans, it contains descriptive narration of the living space each ward inhabits within the M.M.M..

As Murphy performs his daily tasks, the fixed narration depicts patient living quarters as perceived through Murphy’s psyche. Murphy, a character who could just as well be a patient in rather than an employee of the M.M.M., views the space in positive terms:

The pads surpassed by far all he had even been able to imagine in the way of indoor bowers of bliss. The three dimensions, slightly concave, were so exquisitely proportioned that the absence of the fourth was scarcely felt. Then tender luminous oyster-grey of the pneumatic upholstery, cushioning every square inch of ceiling, walls, floor and door, lent colour to the truth, that one was a prisoner of air. The temperature was such that only total nudity could do it justice. No system of ventilation appeared to dispel the illusion of respirable vacuum. The compartment was windowless, like a monad, except for the shuttered judas in the door, at which a sane eye appeared, or was employed to appear, at frequent and regular intervals throughout twenty-four hours. Within the narrow limits of domestic architecture he had never been able to imagine a more credible representation of what he kept on calling, indefatigably, the little world. (Beckett 109)

What is being described, filtered through Murphy's perception, is a small, hot, poorly ventilated room with no windows or privacy. The padded room's feature known as the "judas," is a small opening on the door that allows the nurses to see into the patient's cell but does not allow the patients to see out. To Murphy, who only is happy while being naked and alone inside of his own head, the secluded, dark place is conducive to his mentally deranged preferences. The room's description is reminiscent of the language used to describe Murphy's mind: "Murphy's mind pictured itself as a large hallow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without" (Beckett 67). However, because Murphy is content in such a place, he fails to see the room for what it is: a prison cell strategically masked by the outside appearance of a mental asylum.

When patients were first admitted into Irish asylums, doctors worked under the belief that institutionalization and seclusion would reverse the effects of mental illness and the patient would potentially obtain the ability to reenter normal society. Patients would often be placed in rooms similar to the cells depicted in *Murphy*. However, recent scholarship has suggested that the living conditions experienced by such patients, had the opposite of the intended effect, and these wards retreated further into their ailments. Gillian McClelland sites such scholarship that claims "psychiatric patients suffered from two 'illnesses'; the mental health problem which led to the admission to hospital and the sickness that resulted from institutional [conditions]" (46). Because patients were often kept essentially under lock and key, mental competence deteriorated as the result of the lack of interaction.

Mental health care reform did not begin in Ireland until the last half of the 20th century. Beckett acknowledged and penned his concerns about the inside workings of

these institutions in *Murphy* well before it was recognized as a major, national problem. The effect of the institution's neglect to provide services that are in the best interest of its patients is best depicted in *Murphy* by the ultimate fate of the title character. Murphy enters and embraces the institution as an admittedly unstable worker, but through spending time at the M.M.M., he is ultimately driven mad, a fate that Ticklepenny first predicted. Not only does he decline further into his loose mental state as a result of inhabiting the institution, a careless mix up ultimately causes Murphy to be burned to death within the M.M.M.. The novel's suggestion that institutionalization is harmful, even deadly, is a claim that, although not widely accepted at the time of its publication, proves its author's sharp awareness of the inter-workings and effects of Irish Social Institutions.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

“Hasn’t she two eyes? Two ears? Can’t she see what’s going on?”: Patricia Burke

Brogan’s *Eclipsed*, Moving Forward

Do not question the System!
You want to change the Rule, the Church,
the World! You must start with yourself!
Change yourself first! Get rid of Pride! Obey
the Rule, Sister! Remember
--We are eclipsed. But Blind
Obedience will carry you through!

Patricia Burke Brogan

When Patricia Burke Brogan’s play *Eclipsed* was first performed in 1992, the inner-workings of Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries were revealed to a seemingly unaware public. The production is staged in a fictional Magdalen Laundry where Rose, the daughter of a penitent, journeys to find information about her birth mother. The play forces a connection between the past and present by operating as a frame narrative: the story is introduced in contemporary 1992, as Rose begins to look through boxes, and then flashes back to 1963, depicting the lives of young women housed in the Laundry. The primary action follows a group of penitent women as they are forced to live an existence locked away, tortured, and laboring without compensation. Because of its shocking nature, Brogan’s play has come to inform public perception and common literary stereotypes surrounding the Magdalen Laundries. According to James Smith, “*Eclipsed* first introduced the tropes by which other contemporary retellings have narrativized the Magdalen experience” (91-2). Smith claims that Brogan’s play manages to generate so much “theatrical value” that the staging begins to be seen in “starkly realistic terms” and “[demands] that the audience acknowledge the laundries’ real-life victims” (91).

Although the public has come to consider these tropes fact, information has recently surfaced that suggests Brogan's fictional account, although based in truth, contains many exaggerations. This chapter will conclude this thesis by briefly examining the role Brogan's *Eclipsed* has played in the establishment of popular contemporary literary tropes and demonstrating how to distinguish between fact and fiction by briefly explicating scenes from *Eclipsed* compared to first-hand accounts.

Most contemporary fictionalized portrayals of the Laundries, such as *The Magdalen Sisters* and *Philomena*, depict cruel nuns who treat the penitent women as though they have contracted a contagious disease that causes them to act on their lustful and sinful desires. Often in these accounts, the unkind nuns, led by an overseeing Mother Superior, control every aspect of the penitent women's lives, essentially imprisoning them and treating them as if they, by committing sin, have given up their rights to happiness, autonomy, and general health. This trope is depicted in one of the opening sequences of *Philomena*: while giving birth in the Magdalen Laundry, Philomena Lee is in a dangerous amount of pain, and when it is apparent that there is a serious problem, one nun shouts, "Reverend Mother, please—we must get a doctor. The baby is the wrong way round, it's breech." However, the Reverend Mother does not grant this request; instead she proclaims, "It's in God's hands now. Now we see the hardness in her—the darkness of her eyes. The pain is her penance. It will help absolve her of her sin." The apathy displayed by Philomena's Reverend Mother for the suffering of a penitent is typical behavior exhibited by nuns in modern Magdalen fiction.

This caricature of Sisters in popular fiction based on Ireland's Magdalen Laundries began with Brogan's hyperbolically cruel Mother Victoria in *Eclipsed*. In the

play, Cathy, a penitent woman, is suffering from severe asthma. When a novice, Sister Virginia, petitions Mother Victoria for medicine to treat Cathy's ailment, she is denied her request and is informed of how she should regard the penitents from that point on. Mother Victoria proclaims, "Those women can't be trusted" and "I know Cathy's tricks! She is a bit of an actress! She exaggerates" (Brogan 58-9). When Sister Virginia continues to voice her concern for the women and her lack of understanding for the way they are treated, Mother Victoria replies, "When you take Vows, Sister, you'll receive Grace and Understanding. Keep aloof from those fallen women!" (Brogan 59), claiming that their sinful desires will soon spill over to Sister Virginia if she is not careful. However, because Cathy is denied the medical attention she needs, she suffocates and dies in one of the final scenes of the play.

Blame for Cathy's death is quickly placed on Mother Victoria as Sister Virginia emotionally screams, "Her asthma, Mother! Cathy suffocated! I told you she needed attention!" (Brogan 86). But the fault is just as quickly averted when Mother Victoria retorts, "It was an accidental death! We must pray for her soul" and labels Cathy's demise comparable to one of the "sorrowful myster[ies]" (Brogan 86). The shallow nature of Mother Victoria's mourning, however, is realized when she becomes distracted halfway through praying for Cathy's soul and exits, saying, "Finish the prayers, Sister Virginia" (Brogan 87). Mother Victoria clearly does not care about the penitent women on a personal, emotional, or spiritual level. Her only concern is that the women remain in the laundry and perform their assigned tasks. The untimely death of young Cathy does not faze the Mother Superior, and none of the penitent women believe that she has their best interest at heart: "Bloody nuns! They don't give a damn! Damn! Damn! Damn!"

(Brogan 37). The validity of this, now, stereotypical representation of Magdalen nuns, can and should be questioned compared to factual first-hand accounts from those who lived in the Laundries.

Characters modeled after Mother Victoria come to represent the popular belief that the nuns who ran the Magdalen Laundries acted solely in the sociological and economical interest of the Catholic Church as opposed to in the interest of the women who they were supposedly saving from damnation. James Smith asserts that the nuns in Brogan's play are "dehumanized" and Mother Victoria is only loyal to two obligations: "individual supplication before the rule of obedience and the profitable operation of the laundry in the service of the patriarchal church hierarchy" (101). However, such representations are not entirely factual. Where there is no definitive way to prove that such a character never existed in the history of the Magdalen Laundries, first hand accounts corroborate that all nuns did not share these commercialized characteristics. One such nun, who lived and worked in the Laundry located in Waterford City, habitually wrote in a journal during her time in the laundry, regularly reminding herself to create a place for the penitents to feel secure and as if they belong, mourning the fact that penitent "women [were] dumped [in the laundry] by their families, their lovers and by the State" (Journal). Manuscripts of interviews conducted by state investigators consistently depict nuns who claim to care for the penitent women both personally and spiritually. One such manuscript quotes a former penitent saying, "It has shocked me to read in papers that we were...badly treated by the nuns. Now everything was not rosy in there because we were kept against our will...we worked very hard there...but in saying that we were treated good and well looked after" (McAleese Report). Numerous accounts such as these have

surfaced in recent months, and each one begs for reconsideration of the way in which the nuns who ran the Magdalen Laundries are portrayed.

Various factions of the Catholic Church have often released statements claiming that the portrayals of Church business in popular fiction are inaccurate and foster undeserved ill will. One such statement, titled *Debunking Philomena*, claims that, “[*Philomena*] smears the Irish Catholic Church much the same way *The Magdalen Sisters* did” (2). Similar to this chapter thus far, these statements frequently point to the content of recently released documents, such as the McAleese Report, to refute the common tropes depicted in current literature and film. However, although it is pertinent to reconsider all of the common negative depictions of the Magdalen Laundries, some of the tropes, which were also popularized through *Eclipsed*, have proven to hold merit. Much of Brogan’s play focuses on the mental health and development of the penitents living within the fictional laundry and seems to suggest that the imprisoned women suffered significant mental decline as a result of their stay in the Magdalen. As the effects of institutionalization continue to be studied in Ireland, the way in which the mental health of the penitents is depicted in *Eclipsed*, as well as many other subsequent works of fiction, begins to, although still exaggerated, resemble actuality.

The specific age of the penitents in the play is never explicitly stated; however, they are referred to as “women,” implying they have physically matured past childhood. Although the term “women” is used to describe the penitents, their actions suggest that they operate within the mentality of young, adolescent girls. When the group is first introduced, it is clear that the women live, partially, in an imaginary world. The scene opens with the women singing an Elvis song and inquiring of each other, “Is he here

yet?” (Brogan 20). The girls believe that Elvis is coming to rescue one of the penitents, Mandy. Mandy proudly proclaims, “He’s coming! He’s coming to visit! Elvis is coming!...How is he? My Elvis? Isn’t he always thinking of me when he sings?” (Brogan 27). When they are alone, the women run around singing Elvis songs, imitating the nuns, and bragging about how they will each individually leave the confines of the Laundry and be reunited with their children. It is, however, soon clear that this lighthearted role-play is only one part of their world. The penitent women’s make-believe realm soon comes to a halt as Mother Victoria enters the room inquiring about “His Lordship’s linens” (Brogan 22). Although the women’s role-playing, which she sees as insubordination, angers Mother Victoria, Sister Virginia recognizes that women of their age should not be creating such delusions. Sister Virginia concedes that the women are “drudges” (Brogan 60) and claims that they “need their children” (Brogan 58) to lift their spirits and “bring [them] back to reality” (Brogan 59). It is clear throughout the play that the women are not mentally progressing and remain in a state of arrested development while imprisoned in the Laundry.

The portrayal of the penitents as child-like women has become a controversial trope throughout Magdalen fiction. Recent scholarship has suggested that that when placed in the Magdalen Laundries, penitent women ceased to mature. James Smith posits that, by the end of their tenure in the Laundries, many penitent women were “mentally rather than morally defective” (62). Because outside contact was limited, if it existed at all, many of the women could only imagine the exterior world as it was when they entered the institution, even if they had remained inside the confines of the Laundry for several years. One penitent reported to the investigators of the McAleese Report, “It was

devastating to hear that door locked and know I was never ever to walk out. There was a big wall. I knew I was there for life. When that door was locked my life ended. I never moved on from there” (953). Due to the lack of mental development, many of the penitent women were unable to establish and maintain an independent life even after being released from the Laundry, and these women were forced to remain dependent on the Church for their livelihood.

In an interview published in the *Irish Studies Review*, Brogan commented that she imagined the characters in *Eclipsed* to be set in a cell—“It’s very enclosed. You know that you are in a cell, but your mind isn’t.” (Farley 351). When the girls in *Eclipsed* attempt to break free of their prison-like surroundings by creating an imaginary window to see outside, they generate a unique way of accessing the exterior: “[*Nellie Nora*] balances an old cracked mirror towards an imaginary window as she tries to see the outside world...” (Brogan 20). The cracked mirror *Nellie-Nora* uses to access the imaginary outside world becomes symbolic of the women’s state of existence. Similar to the women who actually lived within the confines of the Laundries, the penitents in the fictional play are only afforded a distorted view of even their imaginary world: they cannot possibly mentally mature or develop absent a clear view beyond their quotidian existence.

Nellie Nora’s cracked mirror, a well-known allusion to Edgeworth and Joyce, also serves as a reminder that *Eclipsed* is primarily a work of fiction. While Brogan did spend time as a novitiate in a Laundry, she insists that *Eclipsed* is a “fictionalized account and [is] not to be considered a narrative of what she had witnessed...in the Magdalen Laundry” (McAleese Report 977). Although some of the literary tropes and stereotypes that began

after Brogan's *Eclipsed* was presented to the public hold some factual merit, the majority of the play depicts a grossly exaggerated reality. A plethora of authors have found inspiration in Brogan's *Eclipsed*, and, as a result, most of the propaganda, fiction, and opinions surrounding the Magdalen Laundries are saturated with the same overstatements Brogan uses as a method of raising awareness. When Brogan published her most recent Magdalen play, *Stained Glass at Samhain*, she stated in an interview titled "Un-Eclipsed: An Interview With Patricia Burke Brogan," that the construction of the drama was about, "rebuilding from chaos, trying to come back again, to heal and resurrect in a better way" (Farley 349). When looking at the production of literature written by authors who have dared to speak out against the negative effects of Irish Institutionalization throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, Brogan's recent mission to begin seeking a "better way" to heal seems particularly astute.

The Magdalen fiction that this thesis has looked at can be divided into separate categories, defined for the purposes of this thesis as literary waves: the first wave consisting of subtle representations of the Laundries couched in metaphorical language and the second wave entailing a backlash to the perceived silence that has resulted in an exaggerated perception of the horrors associated with these Asylums. O'Brien and Beckett both fit into the first wave of literary representations of the Magdalen Laundries. O'Brien and Beckett, although both outspoken for their time, had to remain mindful of censorship laws and the repercussions for speaking out against the Catholic Church. O'Brien seeks to offer her readers a solution-driven response to the Magdalen Laundries, one that is established through detailed character development and is based on the effect each action has on the individual. Beckett offers his readers a Foucauldian discourse

centered on the treatment of Institutionalized individuals and the repercussion these asylums have on the person's mentality.

The second wave of Magdalen Fiction is represented by *Eclipsed* in this thesis, but includes the majority of contemporary literature focused on the subject matter. Because Brogan boldly broke the decades of essential silence when she published *Eclipsed*, the exaggerated nature of the work has caused huge recoil as a result of the public's shock. *Eclipsed* spawned a multitude of literary and film portrayals that rely on embellished truths and have enraged Ireland. This second wave of Magdalen Literature has helped produced a divided country, one that is more focused on assigning blame than on finding a solution. Because contemporary Magdalen representation has infuriated and misrepresented so many, this thesis calls for a third wave of Magdalen fiction that will, as Brogan states, "heal and resurrect." New works should find a middle ground between the literature contained in the first wave and the second wave of Magdalen Literature: it should publically and blatantly seek to create solutions and understand what has gone on.

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