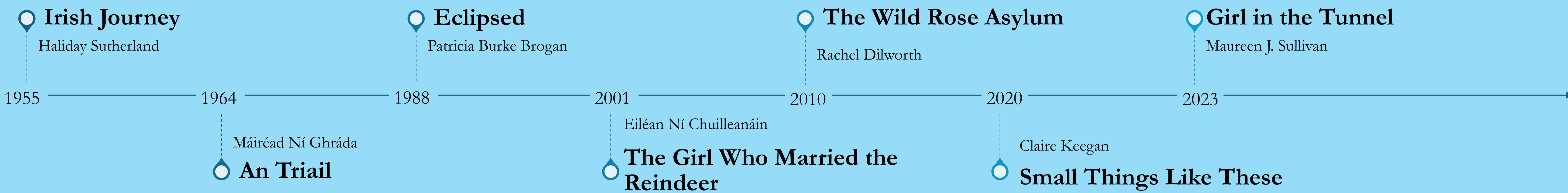


# Airing a Nation's Dirty Laundry: Literary Representations of Ireland's Magdalene Laundries 1955-2023

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## Texts Publication Timeline:



## Background

The Magdalene Laundries were Church-run institutions dedicated to the incarceration and forced labour of women deemed immoral in Ireland. The first Laundry opened in 1765 on Leeson Street, Dublin. The last Laundry closed on the 25th October 1996, though many of the incarcerated women remained living in clergy-run housing into the mid 2010s. Initially, the Laundries were run by Protestant congregations dedicated to the 'rehabilitation' of female prostitutes. However, coinciding with the foundation of the Irish Free State, the institutions transformed into an extra-legal carceral system, designed to control and punish the women of Ireland.

## Research Questions

- ❖ Can the **unsaid** be articulated through literature?
- ❖ How is **cultural trauma** enshrined in Irish literature?
- ❖ What can the recurrence of literary **themes/tropes** reveal about cultural understandings of Magdalene Laundries?

## Methodology

I conducted a close reading of seven texts published between 1955-2023. I identified common themes, tropes and language across the different genres of texts to try to understand how we historicize trauma through fiction. Hence, I approached the texts as receptacles of cultural memory.

Beginning with the earliest text published, I read in a chronological sequence. To honour survivor voices, I concluded with a recent memoir by a survivor. I also visited and documented sites of old Magdalene Laundries in a supplemental short film.

## Findings

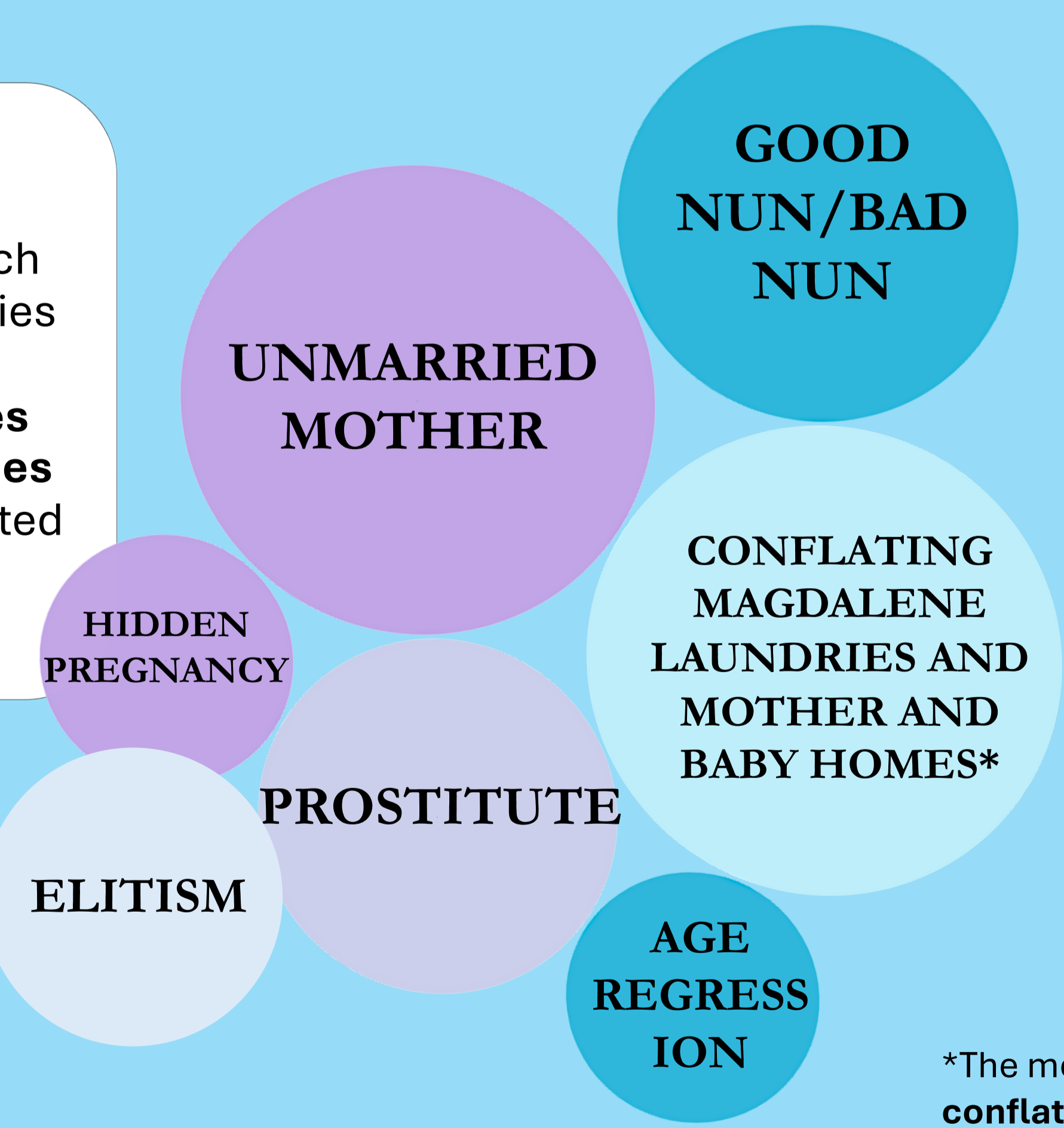
- There is a **significant gap** in literary representations of the Laundries between the 1914 publication of 'Clay' by James Joyce and 1955. This gap coincides with the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the Censorship of Publications Act of 1929, both of which increased the influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Halliday Sutherland's *Irish Journey* exemplifies this, being originally censored by the Mother Superior of the Galway Laundry.
- The **gendered language** of the texts is **static**. The same epithets '*penitents*,' '*fallen*,' '*deviant*,' '*unclean*,' and '*corrupt*' describing women and girls frequently recur throughout the literary timeline. '*Magdalenes*' is also used as a collective noun for women incarcerated within the Laundries. This language is rooted in the Irish Catholic doctrine of concupiscence and the belief that women's sexuality can result in the privation of a man's will, leading to sin.
- The text's use of **institutional language** serves to reinforce the homogeneity of the women represented therein, even as many authors actively attempt to dispel the image of these women as a **monolith**. For example, the women in *Eclipsed*'s stage directions are grouped in institutional terms: **Penitent Women** and in parentheses next to it (**Unmarried Mothers**). Hegemonic Language is pervasive, resulting in what Gayatri Spivak identifies as an act of "**double displacement**" of survivors. This is an observable example of the effects of hermeneutic injustice, a phrase used by Katherine O'Donnell, and the enduring power of language to **determine personhood** in the collective consciousness.
- Childhood survivors of the Magdalene Laundries were **denied an education**, impeding their literacy levels. This presents a dilemma for poetic representations of the Laundries, as many employ figurative, **inaccessible language**. Although ostensibly dedicated to them, this suggests that the audience of some texts is **not the survivors themselves**, but an educated subset of society.

\*The most common and enduring of these tropes is the **conflation of Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries**, which stems from genuine misinformation and deliberate obfuscation of facts by the State and the Church.



- A concern with architecture is woven into the fabric of these texts, a literal manifestation of what James M. Smith calls the "nation's architecture of containment." The texts are all specifically located and sensitive to the **architectural details** of their settings. Spatiality within these sites is mediated through its relation to **physical labour**, e.g the scrubbing of floors, the weight of machinery. As a result, the imaginative act of passing in and out of the sites of containment is highlighted as **transgressive**.
- As the texts chronologically progress, the subject matter becomes less concerned with enforcing the **without/within dichotomy**, than it is with exploring **how society is complicit** in maintaining the illusion of that separation. Only a fraction of *Small Things Like These* occurs within the space of a Laundry; this is unlike earlier texts. Similarly, Maureen J. Sullivan's *The Girl in the Tunnel*, spends 17 of 32 chapters, depicting the society in which the Laundry existed.
- There is a dualistic representation of survivors: the outspoken, rebellious, often sexworker-coded woman; and the quiet, submissive, sexually naive women. This echoes the **Madonna/Whore archetype**; the focus of the texts are on the Madonna, using the 'Whore' as her foil. While sympathy is provided to both figures, it brings into question whether the **sympathy** afforded the Whore is **contingent** on the Madonna's presence. It also enters the texts into 'perfect victim' discourse: who gets to be a victim?

There is significant overlap between **social stigma**, which survivors of Laundries identify as being **harmful**, and **tropes** and recurring **themes** which are represented in literature. These include:



## Conclusions:

This research begins to uncover the complex, intertextual literary legacy of the Magdalene Laundries in Irish Literature. This research finds the importance of reading Laundry literature, not in isolation, but as a collective body of literature. It finds that the evolution of Laundry literature reflects a society slowly identifying with institutional trauma. Representations of Magdalene Laundries are not always historically accurate, though they do occupy a vacuum of information that would otherwise be empty. This research finds that literature expresses a cultural, emotional empathy that is largely absent from historical and government records. Above all else, the research highlights the difficulty of finding the subaltern in literature.