

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



This project was a diachronic close-reading of six texts, spanning from 1955-2023. I read in chronological order, identifying common themes, tropes and language across the range of texts. The reading was centered around three key topics: authorship, memory and subalternity. Hence, I approached all of the texts as receptacles of cultural memory.

In conjunction, I conducted site-visits of five Magdalene Laundries across Ireland to contextualize my readings. I documented each one of these sites through a mixture of audio, video and photography; this introduced me to a fourth key topic which informed my readings: psychogeography. The mixture of mediums was a key aspect of the project, as it grappled with the limitations of language in the face of institutional trauma.

Originally, my proposal set out to examine twelve texts, spanning from 1914 to 2024. I began by reading the short story *Clay* by James Joyce, as this was the original starting point outlined in my proposal. Subsequently, I searched for texts depicting the Magdalene

Laundries in the years between 1914 and 1955. This proved challenging; there is not widely available literature depicting these institutions for many reasons, including censorship by the Irish State and the changing nature of the Laundries during this time.

After a week of trawling through secondary sources and related literature, my supervisor and I came to the conclusion that beginning with *Irish Journey* 1955, and narrowing the time period, would allow for a deeper analysis of the available literature. With this in mind, my supervisor also suggested that I condense the original reading list. From the original twelve texts, I identified the six texts that directly related to the Laundries as the most important focus of my research.

As a result, the first finding of the research is that there is a significant gap in literary representations of the Laundries between 1914 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. An example of censorship in practice is Halliday Sutherland's *Irish Journey*, which was originally censored by the Mother Superior of the Galway Laundry, with the uncensored version being unearthed in 2013.

The other final findings identify 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: Prostitute, Good Nun/Bad Nun, Sexual Deviancy, Age Regression/Perpetual Adolescence, Naming and Hypersexuality.

Beginning with *Irish Journey*, the unmarried mother trope is established as a fixture in portrayals of Laundries. Sutherland writes of a woman he encounters in the Galway Laundry; "She did not look like an unmarried mother." *An Triail* continues this legacy, centering around Máire, an unmarried young woman who becomes pregnant and the ensuing social ramifications upon her. The *Eclipsed* stage directions specify that the inmates of the laundries are categorised as Unmarried Mothers. 11 of 36 poems in *Wild Rose Asylum* make explicit references to unmarried mothers and pregnancy, while *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer* [TGWMR] only makes none. *Small Things Like These* features two parallel plots

about unmarried mothers: Bill Furlong's mother, Sarah, and Sarah, who Bill rescues from the convent.

Apart from TGWMR, the only text which does not heavily feature allusions to unmarried mothers is Laundry survivor Maureen J. Sullivan's memoir *Girl in the Tunnel*. The memoir does include a brief vignette portraying a pregnant girl in a Laundry who the narrator encounters, although this is distinguished as unusual by the dream-like sequence it occurs within.

Research carried out by Justice For Magdalene Research [JFM] and recently amended state documents suggest that, while unmarried mothers were incarcerated in these institutions, they constituted a small sub-set of the women therein. Considering this, my research finds that there is a pervasive overrepresentation of this specific trope in Laundry literature.



This is further evidenced and reinforced by the most common and enduring trope, which is conflation of Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes. For example, while TGHMTR does not explicitly partake in the unmarried mother trope, the poem 'Translation: *For the reburial of the Magdalenes*' is situated next to 'Bessboro' in the text's sequence, drawing thematic associations between the two institutions. Earlier texts such as *An Triail* and *Irish Journey* make no distinction between Laundries or Mother and Baby Homes, while

later texts make partial reference to the existence of such institutions, though remain oblique in distinguishing one from another.

This confirms what Dr Louise Brangan finds in her 'Magdalene Laundries: What Does it Mean to Remember' essay, where she writes;

"Countless people I spoke to had the same mantra: it was awful what the Church and State did to those women and children [...] The problem with this fact is that it is not true: no babies were born in the Magdalene Laundries [...] Yet it is that original derogatory rumor that has remained so fully functioning today."

My research finds that, in the case of the literature, this re-dissemination of the "rumor" stems from genuine misinformation and deliberate obfuscation of the facts by the same State and the Church. The majority of these texts are attempts at being 'faithful' representations of conditions within Magdalene Laundries, featuring forewords and dedications to survivors. However, even the texts that are 'on the victims sides' fall prey to this misconception.

Concordantly, 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, in *Eclipsed's* stage notes, the women in the stage directions are grouped in institutional terms: Penitent Women and (Unmarried Mothers) in parentheses next to it.

Likewise, the gendered language of the texts is static, not diachronic; 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 literature is soaked in ecclesiastical language and titles (Mother Superior, Sister, Penitent, Novice, Consecrated Penitent), which all reinforce the hierarchy of power in the Laundries. Attempts to represent victims of institutional violence are largely entrenched

with hegemonic language, resulting in what Gayatri Spivak identifies as an act of “double displacement” of survivors.

Even as texts such as *Eclipsed* or *Wild Rose Asylum* attempt to incorporate the names of deceased victims, they are actually using the women’s ‘factory names’, the biblical names given to women upon entering into the Laundry, as these are the only names available in Church records. 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.

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, unlike earlier texts. Similarly, Maureen J. Sullivan’s *Girl in the Tunnel*, spends over half of its time, 17 of 32 chapters, depicting the society in which the Laundry existed.

Despite the focus on wider society, 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.

Many texts feature dualistic representations of survivors: the outspoken, rebellious, often sexworker-coded, woman; and the quiet, submissive, sexually naive women. This echoes the Madonna/Whore archetype. 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?

The relationship between victimhood and authorship also played a central role in my research. For example, childhood survivors of the Magdalene Laundries were denied an

education, impeding their literacy levels. This presents a dilemma for poetic representations of the Laundries not written by survivors, as many employ figurative, inaccessible language. Although ostensibly dedicated to them, this suggests that the audience of many of the texts are not the survivors themselves, but an educated subset of society.



Subsequent research in this area will undoubtedly entail uncovering further pre 21st century literature that depicts Magdalene Laundries, specifically in the time period between 1914-1955. Furthermore, this research demonstrates the importance of reading ‘Laundry Lit’ as a collective body of literature, something that has not been widely practised in this research field. This may provide scope to consider how it, as subaltern writing, specifically diverges from the wider Irish literary canon. This also gives the opportunity to compare trends in Irish Laundry Literature to that of international sister institutions, while acknowledging the specificity of the Irish Laundry system.

This relates to a sentiment I found in the paratext and related literature: a collective sense of ownership over the experiences of women in the Laundries. Many Irish women either have direct experience within a Laundry, or are related to someone who does— my own mother grew up behind a Magdalene Laundry. This was something that frequently came up during the course of my research and presented both an academic and emotional challenge. Academically, it was hard to remain impartial about such an emotive issue. Emotionally, it is taxing to immerse oneself in research about abuse, especially as an Irish woman, because

one feels a responsibility towards survivors. While it was difficult to remain impartial and avoid emotional burnout, this passion proved to be an invaluable asset that spurred me on.

Significant challenges included time organisation and self-direction. Coincidentally, these were all areas I had identified in my PDP, which tells me that I anticipated these challenges well. I discovered that I am a creative researcher who benefits from pursuing "rabbit holes" but needs guidance on when to focus. This ate into my time organisation, despite my strategy in the PDP. As a result, I am still working on developing the accompanying documentary-video to this project; presenting all of the work simultaneously would have been ideal.

My supervisor was an invaluable source of information and support during this process. We met every two weeks over the course of the summer to discuss my research and general direction of the project. He kept me focused on the shape of the project as a whole, and listened to my often tangential thoughts. He also introduced me to the concept of 'psychogeography' which became a tenant of my readings.

With his support, I contacted several experts in this specific field, including Prof. Katherine O'Donnell, to ask questions about aspects of the Laundries that I found difficult to clarify from independent research. Prof. O'Donnell was extremely helpful, sending me whole texts of secondary sources which I referenced throughout my research. I also conducted an interview with Mella Cusack, the Education Officer at the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, responsible for creating the Mother and Baby Homes teaching resource for English Junior Cycle. This was outside of the typical academic setting I am used to, and involved navigating through governmental bureaucracies and offices.

Collaboration between myself and experts in the field of Magdalene Laundry research was one vital aspect of this project. It improved my confidence in my own value as a researcher and academic. Collaboration with my videographer on the documentary aspect of the project was a learning experience in leadership; I had to communicate my own creative vision with clarity and precision. It also involved practical considerations, such as booking accommodation and transportation for a team of people.

An unexpected but deeply gratifying aspect of this project was the overwhelming amount of support I received from complete strangers. Countless people who saw me photographing sites approached me to share their own stories about that Laundry. In one particularly memorable moment, I found myself seated on a train between a woman who had sheltered a girl from a Magdalene Laundry, and a woman who was the daughter of a Magdalene Laundry survivor. They thanked me for the research I was doing. Listening to people's personal stories reminded me that literature is alive; the Magdalene Laundries and institutions like it now exist on the level of memory, and storytelling ensures that we will never forget.