

# **The Portrayal of Magdalene Laundries in the Novels of V. S. Alexander and Lisa M. Odgaard**

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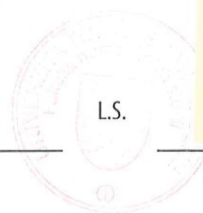
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Odgaard, Lisa Michelle. *The Magdalen Laundries: A Novel Inspired by True Events*. Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.  
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## **ABSTRAKT**

Táto bakalárska práca analyzuje fakty o Magdaléniných pracovniach a porovnáva ich s vybranými literárnymi dielami zaoberajúcimi sa danou témou: *The Magdalen Laundries: A Novel Inspired by True Events* od Lisy M. Odgaard a *The Magdalen Girls* od V. S. Alexandera. Práca skúma, aké praktiky osvojené pracovňami a spoločnosťou si autori vybrali a hodnotí ich správnosť. Môžeme vyvodit' záver, že oba romány uvádzajú veľa opisov odzrkadľujúcich realitu, no zároveň do určitej miery idealizujú niektoré situácie.

Kľúčové slová: Lisa M. Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries: A Novel Inspired by True Events*, V. S. Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, Magdalénine pracovne, Mária Magdaléna, katolícka cirkev, výpovede svedkov, odvrhnuté ženy, kláštor, mníšky

## **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor's thesis analyses the facts about the Magdalene laundries and compares them with the selected works of literature dealing with the topic: *The Magdalen Laundries: A Novel Inspired by True Events* by Lisa M. Odgaard and *The Magdalen Girls* by V. S. Alexander. The work scrutinises the authors' choice of practices adopted by the laundries and society and examines their accuracy. It can be concluded that both novels present many descriptions reflecting the reality but also, to some extent, idealise some situations.

Keywords: Lisa M. Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries: A Novel Inspired by True Events*, V. S. Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, Magdalene laundries, Mary Magdalene, Catholic Church, testimonies of the witnesses, rejected women, convent, nuns

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I hereby declare that the print version of my Bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on the representation of Irish Magdalene laundries, religious institutions founded in 18<sup>th</sup> century, in selected works of literature, namely *The Magdalen Girls* by V. S. Alexander and *The Magdalen Laundries: A Novel Inspired by True Events* by L. M. Odgaard. Although the laundries were both Protestant and Catholic, this thesis provides a detailed description of the Catholic institutions where the women were treated in a more violent and unpleasant manner. An obedient, pure Catholic wife was the ideal model of an Irish woman. Provided she did not meet these requirements, she was obliged to be reformed. The most convenient place for her correction was, according to the Church and state, a Magdalene laundry. Once coming there, she would be humiliated, punished, experiencing starvation, exhaustion, loss of her child as well as lack of medical care. The distressing fact about this part of Irish history is that these practices were promoted not so many decades ago. More specifically, until the end of the twentieth century.

In the first part of this thesis a reader gets acquainted with the importance of the name Mary Magdalene in the Magdalene laundries as well as the different groups of women who were sent to these laundries and dwelled there. Further, a detailed description of the regime and circumstances of the institutions are given followed by the events in history that influenced the development of the Magdalene laundries throughout the centuries. The second part focuses on the depiction of the Magdalene laundries in the two selected pieces of literature. The protagonists of the stories are young girls who, one day, irrespective of their background and social class, find themselves in the Magdalene laundries. They are familiarizing themselves with the rules, conditions and relationships in these institutions.

This thesis aims to compare the survivors' testimonies and the facts presented in the first part of this work with the situations, actions and descriptions in the selected novels and examine their accuracy. The principal question is whether the authors idealise the practices and circumstances in the novels or whether they follow the reality. Even though only one of the novels is presented as being inspired by true events, both *The Magdalen Girls* and *The Magdalen Laundries* successfully depict the hard life of women rejected by society. However, there are particular situations in some parts of the novels which partially idealise both the novels.

## 1 THE MAGDALENE LAUNDRIES

The Magdalene laundries were notorious all around the world, including Australia, Canada, United States, England, Scotland or Ireland.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this work, the focus will be placed on Ireland primarily. Before illustrating the first official Magdalene laundry, it is important to mention the art of prostitution in the middle ages. After all, the homes for penitents were later built because of these fallen women who desired to change their lives. Later, to keep the moral society safe, the state and Church placed an impure woman to the Magdalene laundry in order to avoid any further danger. The authentic aim of the laundries to maintain hope and salvation for the repentants vanished and was replaced by a prison-like institution for every woman who did not fit the idea of a pure female human. The ‘Magdalenes’ who at the dawn of the laundries could have departed from the convents, were later urged to remain behind the walls and closed in their rooms during the night.

Magdalene laundries carry their name after Mary Magdalene who is represented as a fallen woman and the same goes for the women entering the laundries. They are referred to as ‘Magdalenes.’<sup>2</sup> The work carried out by penitents had a symbolic connection to their spirit – washing the dirt from the clothing and linen would clean their souls and help them achieve their moral purity.

### 1.1 Incoming Women

Until the eighteenth century the Magdalene laundries welcomed mostly prostitutes whose carrier was over. In the eighteenth century and further, laundries developed into asylums for all sorts of women including ‘fallen women’ who were ‘fallen’ from the point of view of the Church, women with a chance to fall, women with a plain intellect (and thus deemed a burden of the family in terms of financing<sup>3</sup>), seduced or raped women, criminals or abandoned women.<sup>4</sup> A girl from industrial school could easily appear in a laundry as well. Smith indicates that the intention was to obtain more workers for the laundry while the nuns considered it a prevention for the young girls who, without the guardians, were likely to commit a sin.<sup>5</sup> Further, the beauty of a girl could have often decided about her future spent

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Lea McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalen Laundries: An Analytical History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 166.

<sup>2</sup> James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 40.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 72.

in a convent. The society considered it dangerous for the girl to be gorgeous because then she could easily become a fallen woman. Moreover, she was a temptation for men and thus they could commit a sin because of her.<sup>6</sup>

An unmarried pregnant woman had little chance for a happy life. If she became a victim of a rape and got pregnant, she was forced to keep the baby because abortion was prohibited under the Offences against the Persons Act (1861). She could not protect herself because selling contraception was banned under the Censorship of Publications Act (1929). Moreover, if a woman was abused by her husband, she had no right to leave him as Catholic Church forbade divorce. Considering the majority of Irish people were Catholics, they did not dare to oppose to these regulations.<sup>7</sup> Regarding this matter, another distinct group of incoming women emerges. This group consisted of mothers who killed their babies from the beginning of Irish independence (1921) to the middle of the twentieth century. As Saorstát Éireann states, “the illegitimate child, being the proof of the mother’s shame is, in most cases, sought to be hidden at all costs.”<sup>8</sup> In such situation, a desperate mother sees no better option but to ‘hide’ the baby forever. Smith lists various examples of a mother so determined to keep the baby secret that she suffocates the newborn.<sup>9</sup> Further, he portrayed medical experts’ opinions that the accused women’s simple and childish behaviour is due to their mental deficiency rather than the lack of education.<sup>10</sup> Committing a crime of murder but generally deemed mentally insane in front of the court, the mother was instead of prison sent to the Magdalene asylum to be protected rather than punished.

The mother’s situation of having an illegitimate child caused them both troubles in terms of ruined reputation. Considered outcasts by the neighbours, society and more often than not by their own family, they were despised, rejected or abandoned. This shame stayed within the family also in case of other generations.<sup>11</sup> An Irish family, in order to save their reputation, sent their pregnant female relative without a husband to the Church-run institution. An unmarried mother and her illegitimate child usually found shelter in one of Mother and Baby Homes which were established for single mothers to give birth to their

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<sup>6</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalen Laundries*, 81.

<sup>7</sup> James S. Donnelly, Jr. et al., ed., *Encyclopedia of Irish History and Culture* (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 148.

<sup>8</sup> Saorstát Éireann, *Report of the Commission of the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, Including the Insane Poor* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1928), 73.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries*, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Hugh Connell, *Irish Peasant Society: Four Historical Essays* (Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 1996), 51.

babies.<sup>12</sup> In case a woman was pregnant outside of marriage again, she would be recommended the Magdalene laundry instead of Mother and Baby Home. However, in both cases the child was separated from the mother. While the mother was released or sent to the Magdalene laundry, her child was placed to a foster family or put up for adoption either in Ireland or abroad by the religious orders.<sup>13</sup> However, the illegitimate children were usually taken away from their mothers without their permission.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the information about the children were frequently falsified and as a result the natural parents of the children are not able to track their children down.<sup>15</sup>

Any woman breaking the moral rules was considered a threat to society and the only responsible person was the woman herself. The man who caused the troubles was not urged to take the consequences.<sup>16</sup> As Smith mentions, in one case, where a father sexually abused his daughter younger than fifteen several times, the court concluded that the environment where she lived could without difficulty lead to seduction or adultery. Instead of charging the father with rape, he was not deemed culpable and in order to prevent any further abuse, the girl was sent away. She was placed to a Magdalene laundry, respecting the girls in industrial or reformatory schools who may take her as a bad example.<sup>17</sup>

In England, a woman should be reformed in Magdalene laundry in order to have an economic value as a working citizen once leaving the laundry. On the contrary, as the Church prescribed, a woman in Ireland was considered a proper citizen only in the role of mother and wife. This attitude was adopted also by the Irish state due to the intertwinement of the Catholic Church and the state.<sup>18</sup> Ireland and the Catholic Church being inevitably bounded, the Irish nationality, social roles and moral principles are all based on the principles of the Church. Generally, in a case a woman did not fulfil this role, her place was then in the laundry. Once in there, all the women became equal sinners not differing between the reasons

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<sup>12</sup> Maeve O'Rourke et al., *CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the Data; Principal Submission to the Commission of Investigation into mother and Baby Homes* (Dublin: Justice For Magdalenes Research, Adoption Rights Alliance, Hogan Lovells, 2018), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Maeve O'Rourke et al., *CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children*, 17–19.

<sup>14</sup> Maeve O'Rourke et al., *CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Maeve O'Rourke et al., *CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Mahoney, *Whoredom in Kimmage: The World of Irish Women* (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1993), 178.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalen Laundries*, 182.

of their arrival into the institution. Committed a crime or be innocent, be a virgin, a prostitute or be raped, all of them were treated evenly, even when it came to punishment.<sup>19</sup>

In 1798 the trend of penitents being ruled by the nuns and kept in that place all their lives first occurred with the asylums run by Sisters of Charity.<sup>20</sup> The nuns in Irish asylums supposed that once the woman is put back to life, she will fall again. The penitents were taken as of a childish nature which requires to be constantly supervised and their time needs to be filled (with work). The system of the Irish state offered no possibility of returning the penitent to the society. The education was deemed to be useless for them since they would not understand and appreciate it.<sup>21</sup> Finnegan states that in spite of spending a considerable amount of time in the asylums, many women were illiterate.<sup>22</sup> Uneducated, the Magdalene penitents could not become independent but rather reliable on the nuns. Furthermore, the women were repeatedly reminded of their sins with the only way to their salvation being through repentance and hard work for the church<sup>23</sup>, making them stay and repent.

Society deemed the Magdalene laundries as the worst place a woman could have stepped in. According to Senator Connolly O'Brien in a debate in Irish Parliament in 1960 a young offender would have a better chance for life with a record from prison than from a laundry:

If I were asked to advise girl delinquents, no matter what offences they were charged with, whether to go to prison on remand, or to go to St. Mary Magdalen's Asylum on remand, I would advise them wholeheartedly to choose prison, because I think having a record of having been in prison as a juvenile delinquent would not be so detrimental to the after life of the girl as to have it legally recorded that she was an inmate of St. Mary Magdalen's Asylum.<sup>24</sup>

This statement proves how harmful and dreadful the laundries were (and still are) thought to be and that the impact of the laundries on a woman's life was significant. The features of the life in the laundries as well as the consequences of penitents' occurrence in the institution will be discussed in the following chapters.

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<sup>19</sup> Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish: Magdalen Asylums in Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 42.

<sup>20</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalen Laundries*, 148.

<sup>21</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalen Laundries*, 149.

<sup>22</sup> Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalen Laundries*, 216.

<sup>24</sup> Éire, Houses of the Oireachtas, Senator Connolly O'Brien, *Criminal Justice Bill 52*, no. 19, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1960-07-13/4/> (accessed April 12, 2020).

## 1.2 The Description of the Magdalene Laundries

The name of the Magdalene laundries was inspired by a Biblical character of Mary Magdalene. McCarthy clarifies how the final idea of Mary Magdalene was created from a mixture of various immoral women from the Bible<sup>25</sup> and these together make a great sinner in the form of Mary Magdalene. She is depicted as a ruined woman asking for forgiveness and serves as an ideal character for the representation of the Magdalene laundries where the inmates are also recognised as morally fallen.

The Irish laws never insisted on Church and charitable institutions to store the documents regarding their activities and thus little is known about the convents in general. However, some evidence exists and it proves that the Magdalenes spent most of the day working, sometimes being overburdened, and lacking teaching or health care.<sup>26</sup> Most of the evidence that exists points to the nineteenth century when the laundries served as a reformatory houses for prostitutes, and with the beginning of the new century when they changed into forced labour houses no access to the records is given.<sup>27</sup>

Although there is few documentation on the matter of penitents' activities in the laundries, an article was published in a monthly magazine administrated by Dominican fathers "The Magdalens of High Park." The article describes the act of reception of new penitents and their daily routine. Upon her arrival when she was welcomed heartily, an incoming woman was lead to the convent's church to express her deep gratitude to God for the generosity granted to her. Afterwards, she was offered a heated meal and symbolically clothed into a Magdalene dress, her new uniform.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes her hair was cut as a symbol of forgetting their pride and dedicating their life to her saviour.<sup>29</sup> From this moment on, the repentant had to focus on the process of salvation, which was believed to be the main reason for which the woman was placed in the laundry, and leave her past behind. The last phase was assigning her of a new name, a name of a saint who would direct and lead her through the way of her recovery in the asylum.<sup>30</sup> It is important to mention that the magazine which illustrated the ceremony of reception was published by religious orders. As a consequence, there is a possibility of embellishing the narrative in favour of the Church.

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<sup>25</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 24–25.

<sup>28</sup> "The Magdalens of High Park: Our Dublin Charities," vol. 4, *The Irish Rosary: A Monthly Magazine Conducted by the Dominican Fathers* (Dublin: St. Saviour's Priory, 1897), 180.

<sup>29</sup> Maria Luddy, *Women in Ireland, 1800-1918: A Documentary History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), 59.

<sup>30</sup> "The Magdalens of High Park," 180.

Contrary to the magazine, the witnesses of the Magdalene laundries illustrate the situation more realistic and unfavourable in a Steve Humphries' documentary. Phillis Valentine was awaited at the front doors by several nuns and a priest, following them to a lengthy hallway of a building with window bars and surrounded by massive walls.<sup>31</sup> Christina Mulcahy recounts when her clothes were taken away from her, replaced by an "old brown coarse material"<sup>32</sup> and Martha Cooney states that the robes were "shapeless and they were meant to make you as ugly as possibly could."<sup>33</sup> After being supplied with a new uniform, Phillis Valentine recalls the act of cutting her hair up to her ears because her hair was too long, according to the nuns.<sup>34</sup> Maureen Taylor from O'Riordan's documentary *The Forgotten Maggies* tells about removing of her name and assigning her a new one.<sup>35</sup>

The life in the laundry, according to the magazine, consisted of everyday repetition of the same activities all done without saying a word. The penitents' day started at 5 o'clock in the morning during a summer season and at 5:30 a.m. in winter. While hurriedly dressing, they started a prayer being led by one of them. After clothing they headed to a class-room, finished their prayers and listened to a short religious text. Then they moved to their place of labour and after some time of working they were ready to go on a mass. Breakfast and a prayer followed the mass. When this process was done, a time for a little rest came. The Magdalenes got back to work without any interruption filled only with regular prayers until the dinner at 6:30 p.m. Again, a short break followed and after another prayer, they had to go to bed no later than 9:30 p.m.<sup>36</sup> As Smith correctly points out, this description lacks any details about their work.<sup>37</sup> Martha Cooney fills in the gaps by informing about the hard work of washing, scrubbing and ironing the pieces of clothes and linen.<sup>38</sup> Witnesses also expressed that the food they were receiving was not nourishing at all, with porridge or bread in the morning and sausage, cabbage and potatoes for the rest of the day.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, directed by Steve Humphries, *Testimony Films*, 1998, 13:22–13:43.

<sup>32</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 14:30.

<sup>33</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 14:45.

<sup>34</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 14:55.

<sup>35</sup> *The Forgotten Maggies*, directed and published by Steven O'Riordan and Ger Boland, 2009, 16:19.

<sup>36</sup> "The Magdalens of High Park," 181.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 15:53.

<sup>39</sup> Smith et al., *State Involvement in the Magdalen Laundries*, 31.

### 1.3 The Evolution of the Magdalene Laundries

The beginning of the Magdalene convents came with the first Magdalene houses (for retired prostitutes) shown up in France around 1100.<sup>40</sup> Yet Rollo-Koster declares that the convents became well-known between thirteenth and fourteenth centuries<sup>41</sup> with many of the towns in France supporting these repentant women. The penitent houses of Mary Magdalene spread throughout Europe quickly. McCarthy states that, evidently, thanks to the Magdalene houses many women managed to find a husband and start a family. Those who did not settle down became nuns or simply stayed in the house as repentant women for life.<sup>42</sup> For women entering these houses was necessary to follow certain strict rules and regulations with the aim to dispose her of her sinful nature.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, many women attempting to live there could not adjust to the strict system and struggled with a completely different lifestyle.<sup>44</sup>

The Magdalene laundries of the twentieth century, which are central for this thesis, are closest to the Avignonese Repenties dating back to 1293.<sup>45</sup> When a woman was about to enter, she had to dispose of her clothes and belongings.<sup>46</sup> Living in these homes the repentants were ordered to obey certain principles including honesty, dignity and asking for forgiveness to be able to enter the heaven in the afterlife.<sup>47</sup> Based on the seriousness of violating a rule, a woman could eventually be incarcerated for a long period of time, sometimes even with chains.<sup>48</sup>

Originally, the homes were supported by the public but the interest in them slowly weakened. To compensate the loss, work was added to the penitents and along with doing the laundry, they learned how to do needlework.<sup>49</sup> Excluded from taxpaying by Pope Gregory XI in fourteenth century and thanks to donators, the Magdalene homes soon gathered significant wealth, including money, real estate and produce. Moreover, convents kept all the money earned from doing laundry.<sup>50</sup> In a documentary *The Forgotten Maggies*

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<sup>40</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries*, 73–74.

<sup>41</sup> Joëlle Rollo-Koster, *From Prostitutes to Brides of Christ: The Avignonese Repenties in the Late Middle Ages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 116.

<sup>42</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries*, 85.

<sup>43</sup> Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 177.

<sup>44</sup> Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen*, 181.

<sup>45</sup> Rollo-Koster, *From Prostitutes to Brides of Christ*, 118.

<sup>46</sup> Rollo-Koster, *From Prostitutes to Brides of Christ*, 121.

<sup>47</sup> Rollo-Koster, *From Prostitutes to Brides of Christ*, 119–20.

<sup>48</sup> Rollo-Koster, *From Prostitutes to Brides of Christ*, 122.

<sup>49</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalen Laundries*, 153.

<sup>50</sup> Rollo-Koster, *From Prostitutes to Brides of Christ*, 120–125.



Steven O'Riordan mentions how the institutions “were generating funds from outside individuals, companies, state bodies or government departments, which generated funds on average of £900 per week”<sup>51</sup> yet not one of the women working there earned anything.

At the turn of fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, women working in the Magdalene houses were not considered as penitents anymore but as beneficial free workers for the state and for the Church. The convents changed into places of work rather than homes.<sup>52</sup> Further, they began to be called prisons since the state forwarded female criminals there.<sup>53</sup> They dealt with their repentants disrespectfully, without any education or training, often treated the women like prisoners.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, in 1767 a woman with a philanthropic idea to help the females abandoned by society opened the very first Irish Magdalene asylum.<sup>55</sup> This asylum was an offer of help from Lady Arbella Denny. From the description of the asylum by George Newenham Wright, the inmates were able to make certain profit from their work.<sup>56</sup> The idea was to provide the women with the necessary education, health care and introduce them the Christianity.<sup>57</sup> As a protestant asylum, it achieved a considerable success and was followed by various Catholic Irish convents, the first of them established by Mrs. Bridget Bruke in 1797.<sup>58</sup> Both of them were situated in the capital city, Dublin. Unlike the Catholic Magdalene convents later, the first ones set a philanthropic aim by educating the women in practical skills and prepare them for the life outside the convent.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the humanitarian aim, the situation in the laundries gradually changed. As the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864) appeared ordering women to be examined, many of them were sent to the hospitals or laundries to ensure the social health. Those who occurred in the laundries and were forced to work realised that they were putting their efforts and not receiving anything.<sup>60</sup> A report on Magdalene laundries written in 1867 demonstrates that penitents work in silence, display modesty and present significant change in their behaviour

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<sup>51</sup> *The Forgotten Maggies*, O'Riordan, 25:21–25:40.

<sup>52</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries*, 88.

<sup>53</sup> Leah Lydia Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of an Urban Institution in Languedoc* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 75.

<sup>54</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries*, 89.

<sup>55</sup> Luddy, *Women in Ireland*, 10.

<sup>56</sup> George Newenham Wright, *An Historical Guide to the City of Dublin, Illustrated by Engravings and a Plan of the City* (London: Burns & Oats, 1825), 119.

<sup>57</sup> Finnegan *Do Penance or Perish*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries*, 148.

<sup>59</sup> Fanny Taylor, *Irish Homes and Irish Hearts* (London: Longmans, Green, 1867), 108.

<sup>60</sup> Luddy, *Women in Ireland*, 255.

after entering the laundry.<sup>61</sup> However, as more prostitutes were annually moved into Magdalene asylums, the behaviour of penitents changed considerably. Placed in the laundries against their will, the penitents turned into disobedient and unmanageable and practiced rebellion.<sup>62</sup> Following the Contagious Diseases Acts, women were moved to Magdalene asylums from the hospitals, mother and child homes as well as from orphanages.<sup>63</sup> Irish Famine plays an essential role in the development of Magdalene laundries as well. The Famine attacked the Irish population between the years 1845 and 1852 and many women had no choice but to get involved into prostitution. Moreover, husbands ashamedly left their wives and children because of the inability to manage to pay for the family and thus created an opportunity for the laundries getting full with fallen women and single mothers.<sup>64</sup> Getting closer to the twentieth century, the number of inmates in Magdalene laundries expanded immensely. For example, starting with approximately fifty women in 1850, a particular laundry grew up to a hundred in thirty-three years.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, another laundry accommodating forty penitents in 1853 increased to 210 by the end of nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup>

In twentieth century, despite officially claiming to serve as a reformatory, the laundries changed into institutions generating profit.<sup>67</sup> Contrary to all the other countries which preferred to either close or change their business in order to liberate the women, Irish Catholic Magdalene laundries did not stop their laundry industry and maintained their operation for the following almost a hundred years.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, they decided not to provide any information to the public about the laundries and avoid any inspection.<sup>69</sup> The members of government and providers of justice considered it unimaginable to question the virtue of the representatives of the Church. This situation confirms the untouchable relationship between the Catholic church and the state of Ireland.<sup>70</sup> Finally, in 1967, after many years of debates in the Irish parliament, a proper inspection in Magdalene laundries was carried out and concluded with The Kennedy Report noting that the laundry might be

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<sup>61</sup> Taylor, *Irish Homes and Irish Hearts*, 153.

<sup>62</sup> John James R. Manners, *Notes of an Irish Tour* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1881), 98.

<sup>63</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalen Laundries*, 156.

<sup>64</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries*, 158.

<sup>65</sup> Jacinta Prunty, *Dublin Slums, 1800–1925: A Study in Urban Geography* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), 268–69.

<sup>66</sup> Luddy, *Women in Ireland*, 122.

<sup>67</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalen Laundries*, 181.

<sup>68</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 25.

<sup>69</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, xv.

<sup>70</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 47.

inappropriate from the perspective of legality, the women are ignorant regarding their privileges, older women can have a bad influence on young girls, the nuns are without proper training on how rehabilitate the women and the institution does not provide suitable preparation for the girls returning to everyday life.<sup>71</sup> In spite of such conclusion, the Magdalene laundries operated for another three decades with the last laundry closing its door in 1996.<sup>72</sup>

#### 1.4 The Magdalene Laundries Remembered at Present

Even though the last Magdalene laundry had closed more than two decades ago, the dreadful conditions of the laundries left some enduring marks on the souls and lives of former Magdalenes. The convents until the present day continue to refuse the admission to their archival materials. This refusal makes it impossible for the adopted survivors to find their families as well as for the survivors who demand to have evidence of their confinement.<sup>73</sup>

Ireland to this day perceives the penitents' presence in the Magdalene laundries as voluntary. Smith demonstrates that a woman breaking the moral principles multiple times could be sent either to a prison or Magdalene laundry. Having an alternative, it is considered that she was given a choice and entered the asylum of her own free will.<sup>74</sup> McCarthy distinguishes between what she called a "forced submission" or "voluntary action".<sup>75</sup> In a society where no birth control is legally permitted and available to the woman, poor sexual education is provided and the full responsibility is falling on the woman's shoulders, she has many opportunities which can lead to her failure.<sup>76</sup>

The Magdalene laundries' victims deemed insufficient for the Irish history were simply excluded from it.<sup>77</sup> The women who represent the wrong part of the nation have to be made invisible, with the help of convents which keep their records for themselves. In such situation no proof of their incarceration exists and the history is not complete, missing the proper information. Nevertheless, the stories of victims put light on those parts of Irish history which were shadowed, it shapes the Irish nation in a new way, a way which was covered before. The stories give a voice to all the mothers and their children who were deprecated,

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<sup>71</sup> Éire. *Coiste Fiosrúcháin Chóras Scoileanna Ceartúcháin agus Saothair Tuarascáil/Reformatory and Industrial Schools Systems Report* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1970), 39.

<sup>72</sup> Jennifer Yeager and Jonathan Culleton, *Gendered Violence and Cultural Forgetting: The Case of the Irish Magdalenes*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 136.

<sup>73</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 186.

<sup>74</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 46.

<sup>75</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries*, 198.

<sup>76</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries*, 165.

<sup>77</sup> Yeager and Culleton, *Gendered Violence and Cultural Forgetting*, 135.

rejected and abandoned. A non-profit group Justice for Magdalenes, established in 2003, helps these women find their voice and become visible for the society as well as for the government. The aim of the group is to receive “an official apology from the Irish State”<sup>78</sup> and “the establishment of a compensation scheme for all Magdalene survivors.”<sup>79</sup>

A great part of guilt falls on the Irish state, the nuns and priests, but, as Leef Smith explains, the society is guilty together with the Church and state because it was the families, judges and police who allowed them to practise the business.<sup>80</sup> Now it is them who should help these women not to carry the social stigma, let them be heard and support them in their attempts for a better life outside the Magdalene laundries.

James M. Smith compares the Great Irish Famine and United Irishmen Rebellion commemorations to the memory of Magdalene laundries' victims and while the public engages in the first two actively, no attempt of the reminiscence of Magdalenes has been made so far. Smith ascribes this to the fact that the society still did not identify with their recent past and needs to familiarize with it through “archival sources, testimonies, and legal documents, as well as the range of films, documentaries, art exhibitions, novels, plays, poetry, music, and other cultural reenactments that precede them and follow in their wake.”<sup>81</sup> One of the representations of the subject of the Magdalene laundries is a documentary directed by Steve Humphries, *Sex in a Cold Climate*, based on testimonies of four witnesses of the Magdalene laundries, Martha Cooney, Christina Mulcahy, Phyllis Valentine and Brigid Young. These women entered the laundries from various reasons such as pregnancy out of wedlock, attractive appearance or possible loss of chastity. Alexander's *The Magdalen Girls* and Odgaard's *The Magdalen Laundries* are literature works dealing with the matter of Magdalene laundries as well. The protagonists become Magdalenes after experiencing different situations believed by the religious order to be inappropriate in the moral Irish society. Both these narratives are subjects of the analysis of this thesis and will be further discussed in the second part of this thesis.

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<sup>78</sup> Justice for Magdalenes Research, “About JFMR,” *Justice for Magdalenes Research*, <http://jfmresearch.com/aboutjfmr/> (accessed January 8, 2020).

<sup>79</sup> Justice for Magdalenes Research, “About JFMR.”

<sup>80</sup> Leef Smith, “A Full Heart and Empty Arms,” *Washington Post* (February 2001), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2001/02/20/a-full-heart-and-empty-arms/6b781787-474e-4701-9dac-65ea0c2cd078/> (accessed January 22, 2020).

<sup>81</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 186–87.

## ***2 THE MAGDALEN LAUNDRIES: A NOVEL INSPIRED BY TRUE EVENTS***

As Odgaard informs the readers in her Author's Note, *The Magdalen Laundries* is based on true events, inspired by a television show *60 Minutes: The Magdalen Laundries* broadcasted in 1999.<sup>82</sup> Unfortunately, the episode is available for the citizens of the United States of America only and cannot be discussed at greater length in this thesis. However, Odgaard proclaims that "every event in this book has been documented as occurring to countless young girls, teenagers, and women."<sup>83</sup> Regarding her declaration it can be assumed that the situations described further in this part of the thesis are real. Nevertheless, it is possible that the names are fictional as Odgaard mentions that two characters "sprang to life fully-formed almost immediately"<sup>84</sup> when she started writing the novel. The narrative of the main character Maren is set in 1961 in a city of Dublin, near a small village Somhairle, Maren's hometown. Similarly, some of the Magdalene laundries were situated in county Dublin, among others, Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge at High Park and Sisters of Charity Magdalene Laundry at Donnybrook.<sup>85</sup> The choice of location could signify the inspiration by true events yet the convent's name in the book is invented as a feature of a fictional work.

The story of Maren is narrated many years after her experience with the laundries when she is confronted by her daughter who is concerned about her mother's nightmares. The author uses an analepsis in order to go back in time and narrate the events from Maren's teenage years. The story takes place in a fictional laundry named Convent of the Sisters of Sacred Mercy. When the sixteen-year-old girl reaches the later stage of her puberty, she becomes interested in a handsome boy working on her father's farm. However, cautious local priest changes her innocent dreams of marrying him when he, in order to protect her purity, preventively hands her over to the nuns in charge of the above-mentioned laundry. Maren experiences the hard work of doing the laundry, the punishments, starvation, lack of sleep as well as deprivation of her family. On the other hand, she meets a kind girl and they become very good friends. Maren never stops believing that somebody would come to take

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<sup>82</sup> Lisa Michelle Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries: A Novel Inspired by True Events* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 225.

<sup>83</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 225.

<sup>84</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 225.

<sup>85</sup> Justice for Magdalenes Research, "Map of Magdalene Laundries and Graves," *Justice for Magdalenes Research*, <http://jfmresearch.com/home/map-of-magdalene-laundries-and-grave-locations/> (accessed March 2, 2020).

her back home and after many months, her father finally appears in the laundry determined to depart with his daughter.

## 2.1 Incoming Women

From outside one could recognise the high stone façade around the convent. It is commonly acknowledged that the women residing in the laundry have been sinful and the local clergy transferred these sinners to their new religious dwelling. Maren have always looked at the building with respect, she regarded it as mysterious and redoubtable although she could not say why.<sup>86</sup> Evidently, the society did not have access to the information concerning the laundries. It can be attributed to the fact that the inspections were not performed by the state because the nuns argued that they did not function as a state organisation but as a Church institution.<sup>87</sup> The topic of laundries was a taboo within the society so when a girl arrived there, she was without the knowledge of what was awaiting her.

Raised on a farm as a well-behaved Catholic daughter, Maren Bradigan turned out to be an attractive young lady. Her father has employed a healthy skilful boy on the farm to help him with his duties and after a while Maren becomes interested in him. However, a local priest considers her behaviour hazardous as he is observing her dancing with the boy on a fair. The day she comes to the Church to make a confession about her thoughts and feelings regarding the young man changes everything. The priest decides she needs to be prevented from falling (as was one group of the incoming women to the laundry) and soon contacts the Mother Superior of the nearest laundry. Indicating the secrecy of the girls and women that have been sent to the laundries, the priest keeps a journal which contains the names of all the girls he has sent to the convent, locked in a drawer of his table. Odgaard places emphasis on the description of the journal as being aged, worn and consisting of many pages full of girls' names<sup>88</sup> which signifies the long time the laundries have been operating.

Ceara MacAodhagáin belongs to another group of girls who work in the Magdalene laundries. She is educated, deeply religious, her family comes from an upper middle class and her parents arranged a marriage for Ceara and a son of her parents' friends. Even though it is certain that the wedding will take place, Dougal, Ceara's future husband, forces her to have sex with him before the wedding. As a portrayal of the lack of sexual education, which was common during the laundries' operation, Ceara admits that she "hadn't—had a lot of

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<sup>86</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 14.

<sup>87</sup> McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalen Laundries*, 184.

<sup>88</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 26–27.

education on that sort of thing.”<sup>89</sup> After some time, Ceara learns that she is pregnant. When she meets Dougal and announces the news, she is rejected. Dougal finds a priest and accuses Ceara of fornication. Bringing an unforgettable shame on her family, her parents allow the priest take Ceara away. In this particular situation, Odgaard demonstrates the fact about the absence of male culpability in the case of pregnancy of a woman, and her full responsibility as is specified in the first part of this thesis.

Throughout the book, a reader is introduced to few other pregnant girls who enter the laundry, older women who have been in the laundry for a longer period of time as well as girls who are too pretty and might give men a reason for adultery. One of these girls is charming Anya who has her hair cut short soon after her arrival at the laundry because she was exceptionally beautiful.<sup>90</sup> All these types of women and girls are listed in the first part of this thesis as females being admitted to the Magdalene laundries.

## 2.2 Entering the Convent

Odgaard selected the character of Maren to be a reflector and the reader is through her eyes informed about the place, other characters and events which occur in the laundries. The way of transferring Maren to the laundry is relatively inhuman. While the girl is in class at school, the priest and a nun appear in front of the building and, betraying her trust, kidnap her and take her to the convent without ever informing her parents. Unconscious of where the car is going, she is not allowed to follow the road because the windows are covered with a black sheet. The intensity of the moment grows as Maren finds where she has appeared and starts fighting in an attempt to run from the convent but the priest holds her tight and forwards her inside of the laundry. This makes a big difference to what is stated in the religious magazine “The Magdalens of High Park” where upon her arrival a Magdalene is greeted with love.<sup>91</sup> The greeting in Odgaard’s novel is aggressive, forced and daunting. As soon as Maren is seated in the office of the Mother Superior, she is confident about Mother Superior’s authority and, perhaps, cruelty. Apparently, Maren has a great respect to the Mother and does not dare to object to anything she says. As Martha Cooney, a Magdalene laundries’ survivor, states, “you never criticised them holy nuns, you did what they said without questioning the reason why.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 79.

<sup>90</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 88.

<sup>91</sup> “The Magdalens of High Park,” 180.

<sup>92</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 1:00.

Odgaard includes in her story the connection between the Magdalene laundries and Mary Magdalene as well as the meaning of washing the laundry. It is explained to Maren that the hard work of washing is supposed to wash away the sins the Magdalenes have committed. Also, the nuns compare the girls and women to Mary Magdalene who was also saved by Jesus.<sup>93</sup> Maren is not led to the convent's church for a prayer as is depicted by Dominican fathers but instructed to confess her sins in the office. Admitting her feelings and hopes, she is aware of the act the nuns and the priest forced her into. With the quiet gestures and noises of the nuns when Maren is speaking about the boy, she realises how serious and shameful it must sound to them while to her it was an innocent love.<sup>94</sup> The feelings of Phyllis Valentine, who experienced the Magdalene laundries, surface as she was made by the nuns to believe that it was sinful when a man puts his hands on a woman.<sup>95</sup> Odgaard states it accurately when she writes that “[i]t was these three [two nuns and a priest] who were making it a crime to feel fondness toward someone of the opposite sex.”<sup>96</sup>

Contrary to the typical portrayal of taking a girl's name, clothes, possessions and cutting her hair as soon as she enters, none of these obligations are met the first day. The change of name is the girl's own initiative aiming to adjust to her new life. Only one girl, above-mentioned Anya, has her hair shaved in order to deprive her of her beauty. Also, the usual picture of a bedroom full of beds for the Magdalenes is replaced by almost-private chambers for two girls.

Although Odgaard does not mention bars on the windows, the building of the convent in the book has no windows. The long terrifying corridor of the laundry is illustrated when the nuns lead Maren to the laundry where she will be spending most of her time. Even though she is not deprived of her clothes, she is clothed to the Magdalene's uniform the next day. Odgaard did not lay any particular emphasis on the description of the dress. Maren's first meeting with the other penitents is distressing as they all look defeated and without life. She is shocked by the sight of the women and she is determined not to surrender.<sup>97</sup> Even though she is successful in keeping her mental health, later, her tired face and scruffy hair reflect the lack of sleep, scanty hygiene and poor nutrition.

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<sup>93</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 54.

<sup>94</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 44.

<sup>95</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 45:40.

<sup>96</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 45.

<sup>97</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 50.



### 2.3 The Convent's Order

At the first sight, a conversation between the incarcerated women seems to be an ever day matter, as Maren could freely speak to her roommate<sup>98</sup>, heard other girls whispering among themselves<sup>99</sup> and she herself started a conversation with Deidre<sup>100</sup>, a girl who arrived after Maren. However, later she is introduced to the absolute silence that is present all the time during work and meals. It can be estimated that this communication is performed secretly or privately because the usual confessions of the former Magdalenes include all-day silence. Mary Smyth, a survivor of Magdalene laundries and part of the cast of O'Riordan's documentary *The Forgotten Maggies*, was not allowed to speak during the day.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, Martha Cooney states that quietness along with prayers and work occupied their days.<sup>102</sup>

When Maren descends the staircase from her bedroom to a dining room to have the meal the following morning, the room is full of approximately two hundred women. In 1961 when Maren is experiencing her incarceration, the high number of Magdalenes living and working in the laundries is common since, as was mentioned in the first part of this thesis, from the twentieth century onward the laundries expanded. The food is poor in the laundry, containing only undercooked porridge and water for breakfast and other plain food for the rest of the day, as is mentioned several times in the book. However, one evening Maren sneaks into the kitchen and finds leftovers of food for the nuns. She discovers rich, nutritious and still warm vegetable soup with beef. Evidently, the laundries have no regard for the health of the penitents and while the nuns profit from their work and afford to consume nourishing food, the women are denied any balanced diet.

Maren is acquainted with the regime of the laundries. She must follow the rules otherwise a punishment comes, get up at five o'clock with the sound of the bell and head to Mass before breakfast. Then comes work, another meal and going to bed at nine in the evening. The schedule is almost identical to the system the Dominican fathers talk about in their magazine. Even though the detailed work is missing in the narrative of Dominican fathers, Odgaard chose to assign the girls the process of filling up their basins, washing and scrubbing the linen and clothes while being carefully watched by the nuns. The duties are

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<sup>98</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 59.

<sup>99</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 50.

<sup>100</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 101.

<sup>101</sup> *The Forgotten Maggies*, O'Riordan, 38:43.

<sup>102</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 19:53.

comparable to the testimony of Martha Cooney when she reports that “[they] had to bend over the big sinks, washing, scrubbing.”<sup>103</sup>

The depiction of punishment is severe in this novel. The women receive whippings if they complain or stop praying during their work and punches and kicks if they do not cooperate even though they are sick. Maren has her hair violently cut as a punishment when she tried to steal some food for her ill friend.<sup>104</sup> The cruelty of the Mother Superior emerges when too many girls get their period and are excused from work. Phyllis Valentine repeatedly claims that the nuns were abnormally vicious.<sup>105</sup> Odgaard illustrates one situation which displays their brutality. First, the Mother Superior forces the girls to expose themselves in order to prove that they are bleeding. Humiliated, most of them listens to Mother Superior’s order but one stubborn and proud girl, Deidre, refuses to obey and the Mother Superior grips her hands around the girl’s neck and holds until she loses consciousness.<sup>106</sup> Another time Ceara answers back to the Mother Superior and she in a great fury beats her. Already unconscious, she is receiving a serious beating and starts bleeding heavily.<sup>107</sup> Martha Cooney’s testimony provides a partial explanation for the behaviour of the Mother Superior, stating that “you never criticised the priest, you never criticised them holy nuns.”<sup>108</sup> Without being open for inspection, the medical condition of the penitents could not be scrutinised and therefore, Ceara was left alone for many days to heal on her own accord. Moreover, no doctor visits the pregnant women in the laundries and Maren is a witness of a young girl’s death as a result of a miscarriage in the last stage of her pregnancy.<sup>109</sup>

Priests’ behaviour also posed a problem in the Magdalene laundries. Frequently, the girls were abused by them sexually, as Brigid Young, former child of the Magdalene laundries’ orphanage, reports in the documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate*. She was supposed to confess to a priest of the laundry. Brigid Young reveals how he harassed and abused her.<sup>110</sup> Deidre, the character of a proud girl, falls a victim to the convent’s priest when, after being repeatedly required to do other acts with him, he rapes her. Consequently, she becomes pregnant and does not appear in the laundry anymore in order to hide the truth. When Maren

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<sup>103</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 15:57.

<sup>104</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 122.

<sup>105</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 24:48.

<sup>106</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 91.

<sup>107</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 110–11.

<sup>108</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 0:57.

<sup>109</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 63.

<sup>110</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 34:20–35:04.

learns about Deidre's situation, she feels genuine outrage but another Magdalene informs her that "[e]veryone knows about Father Connall . . . There's more than one girl in this place that's delivered one of his babies."<sup>111</sup>

Odgaard refers to relationships in the convents. Martha Cooney informs that 'special friendships' (meaning gay relationships among the Magdalenes) were forbidden in the laundries.<sup>112</sup> However, Maren experiences an unsuccessful seduction by her roommate who had many of these relationships. Following their argument, Maren gets a new roommate in a form of young pregnant girl Ceara. They become close friends and discuss the matter of a childbirth in the laundries. Ceara knows that she cannot keep her baby after it is born because it will be taken away from her. She proclaims that "[t]hey'll take it as soon as it's born. They always do, you know, so there's no bonding."<sup>113</sup> Maren is aware of this fact as well, as it can be observed in one of her narrated monologues when she is watching Ceara talking to her unborn child and Maren is thinking that "Ceara might never hold her child in her arms."<sup>114</sup> As their conversation proceeds, Maren discovers that "[t]hey [the nuns] put the children in the orphanage right next door."<sup>115</sup> It was not rare that laundries and orphanages were interconnected. Brigid Young experienced it herself as a child growing up in one such orphanage.<sup>116</sup> Convent of the Sisters of Sacred Mercy had an orphanage attached to the building as well.

When a day for Ceara's baby birth comes, she decides to give the birth in a privacy of her and Maren's bedroom to be able to spend with the child some minutes before the nuns take it from her. A child of Christina Mulcahy, who was a penitent in Magdalene laundries, had been withdrawn from her also but not immediately. She breastfed him for some time.<sup>117</sup> In an attempt to give the birth without any medical help, being assisted only by Maren who knows as little as Ceara about a delivery (again, it can be suggested that it was due to the poor sexual knowledge), the baby suffocates with the umbilical cord which is tied around her neck.

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<sup>111</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 129.

<sup>112</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 21:36.

<sup>113</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 132.

<sup>114</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 96.

<sup>115</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 132.

<sup>116</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 27:12–27:30.

<sup>117</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 8:14–8:57.

## 2.4 Escape and Closure

The plan of Maren's escape is not very thoroughly prepared. It is rather a question of luck when the girls place a note in a hole of convent's wall to be found and delivered to Maren's family. Improbable in reality, the note is noticed by Maren's brother and her father comes to save her from the convent. Moreover, he is not ashamed of his daughter who spent a part of her life within the walls. Even if the Mother Superior tries to persuade him about the fabricated information about adventures of his daughter, he does not listen to her lies and is ready to rescue Maren.<sup>118</sup> Odgaard authentically depicts the prison-like environment that has replaced the humanitarian one from the twentieth century onward, when the nuns stand in a way of Maren's father to lead her home. Unfortunately, Ceara is not rescued.

The murky past Maren has experienced follows her to her present day in a form of nightmares that come frequently. She lived with her shameful secret for many years, unable to reveal her memories to her family. When her daughter turns seventeen, she is ready to share her traumatic experience. Christina Mulcahy had a comparable problem. She lost her respect, dignity and pride with bringing up a child out of wedlock. Her family has never learned about her lover and their child until many decades passed when she finally managed to face her fear.<sup>119</sup>

Maren is one of the many women who are afraid to stand for themselves and fight for their rights even though they deserve it. In 1994, when Maren tells her story to her daughter Brigid, she is convinced that nothing can be done in order to help the incarcerated women. Through the activity of Brigid searching for the Magdalene laundries on the Internet, the readers are notified that only few information is available about the convents<sup>120</sup> since the Catholic Church continues to keep the records inaccessible to the public and the topic is taboo in Ireland.

At the end of the novel Odgaard informs about 133 bodies that have been found under the ground of the Convent of the Sisters of Sacred Mercy after the nuns sold the buildings.<sup>121</sup> This report possibly refers to High Park Magdalene Asylum where an unmarked grave of anonymously buried Magdalenes have been discovered.<sup>122</sup> Maren learns about a memorial being built for all the victims of the laundry, reading an article headline "Magdalen Memorial

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<sup>118</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 195.

<sup>119</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 46:11–46:40.

<sup>120</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 205.

<sup>121</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 208.

<sup>122</sup> Justice for Magdalenes Research, "High Park," *Justice for Magdalenes Research*, <http://jfmresearch.com/home/preserving-magdalone-history/high-park/> (accessed December 5, 2019)

to be Erected in Glasnevin.”<sup>123</sup> Odgaard used the real name of the cemetery where the cremated remains of the Magdalenes are buried.<sup>124</sup> Maren later visits the plaque of other Magdalene laundries’ victims and finally finds inner peace. Her story can be a reference to all the Magdalenes survivors who are slowly finding peace by recognition of their suffering in the institutions.

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<sup>123</sup> Odgaard, *The Magdalen Laundries*, 208.

<sup>124</sup> Justice for Magdalenes Research, “High Park.”

### 3 THE MAGDALEN GIRLS

Alexander's novel is a fictional take on Magdalene laundries in Ireland. It takes place in Dublin in 1962 and the story revolves around three girls who become rejected by the society, unfit for the Christian model of morality in Ireland and hidden in a place where all women with an unrepresentative behaviour end up. Nora, Teagan and Lea meet each other in the convent of The Sisters of the Holy Redemption. Nora, a girl too pretty and confident almost commits a sin of sexual character and another girl, Teagan, is a too big a lure for a man of God so the Church needs to get rid of her. Deeply religious parents of both girls, the Catholics, could not cope with the shame their daughters would bring on the families. The best option for them is to hide them from the world and save the family reputation. Ironically, at the end of the story, a reader becomes acquainted that Teagan herself was adopted. As a child of a single mother, which was unacceptable, she was raised by Catholic parents as their own daughter until she disgraces the family. Lea, on the other hand, is deemed useless on a family farm because of her extraordinary look and character. The girls comfort and support each other while they spend the days doing their duties, receiving punishments and confronting the unfavourable conditions and strict rules. However, only Teagan is given another chance for life when her aunt comes to take her away from the laundry. Unfortunately, Lea dies in the fire when she is making an attempt to save Nora's baby and Nora loses her mind when her child passes away.

#### 3.1 Incoming Women

Teagan Tiernan, one of the three protagonists of the novel, represents an obedient, educated and religious daughter of Catholic parents who mind the opinions of their neighbours and the Church. The typically patriarchal family owns a house in a prestigious Dublin district. Her father strictly manages their home earning money as an assistant in a parliament. Her mother is always neat, ready to show the perfect image of an Irish Catholic woman and taking care of her only child. Teagan, opposite to her mother, is convinced that a woman should contribute to the world and not only "bear children and cook."<sup>125</sup> She does not desire to follow the scrupulous rules of her parents anymore and becomes interested in men, having a relationship with Cullen, polite young man. At a reception of a new priest in their parish, she spots an attractive man and becomes interested in him. The man turns out to be Father Mark, the new priest, and soon she finds herself following him into a cellar

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<sup>125</sup> Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, 32.

downstairs. What seems to be an innocent short dialogue of two people getting to know each other is a meeting unacceptable for the Catholic society. An arrangement had been made quickly by the former parish priest in order to prevent the catastrophe and save the new priest from the tempting young girl. Deaf to his daughter's pleading, the head of the family puts Teagan in the car and drives her to The Sisters of the Holy Redemption. They set out on the road early in the morning to avoid the neighbours' questions and judgements because the family could not afford losing its respect. Teagan later learns that her mother joins a new group of bridge players further away from her home in order to avoid her friends' questions.<sup>126</sup> From this time on, Teagan is no more a daughter of her parents, but a sinner seeking redemption.

Nora Craven, another protagonist, comes from a different area of Dublin. She belongs to a lower class and lives with her parents in a small tenement. Nora is more rebellious and headstrong than Teagan, yet still religious. Her dreams at sixteen are unlimited, the biggest one to leave the life she lives, accompanied by her boyfriend, Pearse, who admires her beauty and always makes her passionate. Everything crashes when he finds another woman, breaks his promise of taking her away and she, in an attempt to persuade him to stay, tries to seduce him. Her mother interrupts before anything happens but catching her daughter lying under Pearse, she later informs her husband. He immediately locks Nora in her room until the nuns come for her.

Lea used to live on a farm west of Dublin with her stepfather. She was sent to the convent of The Sisters of the Holy Redemption because her father believed that her physical and mental condition was not suited for farming. When Teagan encounters Lea for the first time, she is surprised by the girl's unusual appearance:

She looked odd, Teagan thought, a bit off . . . Lea's pale blue eyes had the wide, pulled-open look of someone on the brink of madness . . . There was something alien, almost translucent, about her flesh. Lea's alabaster skin reminded Teagan of the marble figures she had seen in the National Gallery in Dublin. Only the delicate blue veins that crossed her arms provided some color against the whiteness. Lea moved like a water bird, in long, languid actions that left Teagan feeling unsettled.<sup>127</sup>

Not only her appearance, but also her mind is considered to be ill. It is assumed by the nuns and penitents that Lea is insane due to her frequent confessions about seeing Jesus or the

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<sup>126</sup> Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, 239.

<sup>127</sup> Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, 58.

dead children buried in the garden of the convent. Lea has been in the laundry for four years already and she plans to stay there, believing it is the best place for her.

### 3.2 Entering the Convent

When Teagan enters the convent, one of the first thoughts that crosses her mind is the prison-like dark corridor where the Mother Superior is leading her. Embraced by the granite walls, it is no surprise she feels like in a prison. She tries to clarify the terrible misunderstanding that occurred because Teagan is, she believes, wrongfully, labelled a sinner. However, when she tries to speak, she is stopped vigorously, warned not to speak unless she is asked to.<sup>128</sup> Teagan understands the nuns' power over the penitents, just like Phyllis Valentine describes it:

The nuns, they were Gods to you. You didn't dare question them. What they done was right and you followed their instructions to the letter. You didn't dare. It was as simple as that. You just done what you were told.<sup>129</sup>

This way she is never able to defend herself and explain the misleading situation. Sitting in the Mother Superior's office, Teagan soon realizes the irony of the four wooden children's blocks arranged on the table saying LOVE, a feeling, she assumes, the nun has never experienced, judging from her cold behaviour. Just like a Magdalene laundry survivor states, "nuns weren't supposed to be cruel, they were sisters of mercy, they didn't show any mercy."<sup>130</sup> It can be proposed that the children's blocks could also, symbolically, refer to all the babies the women had left behind when they entered the laundry, or the attached orphanage where the children resided. Apparently, an orphanage is part of the convent of The Sisters of the Holy Redemption as the Magdalenes are allowed to go to the convent's garden one day and they hear children's laughter nearby.

As Teagan is looking around the office, she notices a picture on the wall illustrating a kneeling woman washing Jesus' feet. The picture should depict Mary Magdalene, the woman the laundries were named after. Another name Teagan is labelled with is 'Magdalene'. Unfamiliar with the meaning, the Mother Superior tells Teagan the story of Mary Magdalene who originally was a fallen woman and changed thanks to Jesus, became morally spotless and followed him. Similar to the purpose of Magdalene laundries described

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<sup>128</sup> Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, 47.

<sup>129</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 21:15.

<sup>130</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 48:27.



in this thesis, Alexander also employed in his work the action of cleansing of the sinner's soul by repenting in a convent.<sup>131</sup>

At the breakfast, Teagan meets the other Magdalenes and she is shocked by their looks. Despite their young age, they are all devastated, broken and resigned. They display the signs of exhaustion which can be ascribed to the long hours of work. The women realised that there was no way of getting away from there. Christina Mulcahy portrayed this situation. When she secretly asked one girl about their departure, the girl replied "once you come here you won't be going out."<sup>132</sup>

Contrary to Teagan's, Nora's morning arrival was much louder, aggressive and defiant. Mother Superior, not supporting wild and profane behaviour, punishes Nora the same day she comes by locking her in a dark room for several hours. This act can be compared to the incarceration of women in the Avignonese Repenties. Some instances later, Nora is punished again with slaps in her face for her arrogant behaviour.<sup>133</sup> Phyllis Valentine admitted that the nuns were very cruel and she remembers the girls were "punched, slapped, the nuns had this black leather belt . . . and really hit your hard with it."<sup>134</sup>

### 3.3 The Convent's Order

Unlike in the convents, mentioned in the first part of this thesis, which at the beginning of the twentieth century accommodated a hundred and more women, only twelve women, including Teagan, can be counted in the laundry when she comes. This number can be regarded as remarkably low in contrast to the above-mentioned sources. When Teagan is presented the bedroom, she can see a dozen of beds. Even though the number is not as dreadful as in the testimony of Maureen Taylor when she mentions approximately seventy beds<sup>135</sup> situated in the dormitory, the room still offers no privacy and the girls are not provided with any comfort of their own bedroom. She is given her own Magdalene uniform, grey sackcloth robe and white apron, like her colleagues were clothed in and the Magdalene laundries' witnesses describe in their testimonies in *Sex in a Cold Climate*.<sup>136</sup> Afterwards, Teagan is deprived of her jewellery and assigned a new name of a saint (as described in the act of reception of a new penitent earlier in this work), in this case—Teresa. All the women

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<sup>131</sup> Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, 48.

<sup>132</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 17:25.

<sup>133</sup> Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, 72.

<sup>134</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 24:36.

<sup>135</sup> *The Forgotten Maggies*, O'Riordan, 16:38.

<sup>136</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 14:25–14:40.

had their hair cut shortly and the same is to be done to Teagan. Although explained as a practical solution rather than a symbol of losing the pride by Luddy,<sup>137</sup> the short hair was a prevention from having the strands caught in the machines. Later, as well as Teagan's, Nora's name is changed, hair cut and clothes replaced by the uniform.

As soon as Teagan enters the office of the Mother Superior, she hears sounds of flowing water and steps above her head. Coming to the convent at dawn, it meant that the women working in the laundry were already awake and getting ready for morning prayers. This fact corresponds to the real Magdalene laundries where the bell rang early in the morning. Teagan is introduced to the laundry where she will spend most of time doing laundry, together with lacing (to generate profit for the convent since doing the laundry did not earn the desired amount of money). She learns that washing of the laundry will symbolically clean her soul from the dirt (the emblematic link which was also interpreted to the penitents entering the laundries). Being shown the laundry room, Teagan detects the barred windows all over the room,<sup>138</sup> which corresponds to Phillis Valentine's description in her narrative about her arrival to the laundry.<sup>139</sup>

When Teagan starts working, piles of laundry need to be done and soon a car bringing another batch comes. Alexander does not mention the money earned by doing the laundry but he addresses the situation by stating that "the nuns were doing a good business."<sup>140</sup> The work includes washing, drying and ironing, the washers and dryers are modern and electric. The break mentioned in "The Magdalens of High Park" is not recognised in *The Magdalen Girls*. The absence of rest from work is believed to be true because none of the testimonies of survivors acknowledges the breaks between work. Martha Cooney literally states that "[they] had no recreation."<sup>141</sup> Teagan and the rest of Magdalenes spend all day working until seven in the evening, stopping only for a half an hour to have their meals. Prayers followed the dinner and then a time for bed came as depicted in "The Magdalens of High Park."

Teagan is allotted her breakfast consisting of bread, oatmeal and tea, all of which is insufficiently prepared. The food matches the description of breakfast in *State involvement in the Magdalene Laundries*.<sup>142</sup> The lunch consisted of a bad part of beef meat, potatoes and an overcooked carrot or damp corn and dinner was the remaining food from lunch. Although

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<sup>137</sup> Luddy, *Women in Ireland*, 59.

<sup>138</sup> Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, 52.

<sup>139</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 13:23.

<sup>140</sup> Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, 62.

<sup>141</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 19:50.

<sup>142</sup> Smith et al., *State Involvement in the Magdalen Laundries*, 31.

a bit more nutritious from the daily food in the above-mentioned piece of work, it was still lacking any delicacy or vitamins. Another phenomenon reflecting the reality is the silence disturbed only by mumming the prayers. It is surprising for Teagan that none of the girls sitting by the table seeks to talk to her. Christina Mulcahy informed in the documentary that any new girl coming cannot be addressed or shown any camaraderie.<sup>143</sup> Later, Teagan is instructed not to talk during her work neither after the lights out.<sup>144</sup> In this regard, the novel presents the reality in Magdalene laundries truthfully.

On the other hand, Teagan's mother does not disown her daughter but attempts to keep a contact with her which can be regarded as idealisation of the Magdalene laundries. One day a priest of Teagan's parish comes and brings her a letter saying the words of love from her mother. Another time she is visited by her boyfriend Cullen who brings her Christmas presents from her mother. Teagan concealed all the presents for the nun would take them from her just like her jewellery. At the meeting, Cullen points out that she would probably not get the letter if he did not bring it himself. The nuns would not deliver it to Teagan. This information can be related to Christina Mulcahy's statement that the letters she and her lover desired to exchange never got further than to the hands of the nuns.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, Teagan decides one day to send letters to her parish priest and the Pope himself. She is clarifying her wrongful situation and asking for the damage being compensated in a form of releasing her from the convent. To her bad luck, the letters never reach their addressees and stop at the nuns.

Another element of the Magdalene laundries' history is portrayed when the Reverend Conry and Cullen come to visit Teagan. Both these men are of Anglican Church and Alexander carefully depicts these two characters. Cullen himself is careless about the Teagan's reputation. He notifies Teagan of rumours which have been spread about her and Father Mark. However, Cullen believes that she is innocent and promises her to return and take her away from the convent. Reverend Conry is said to be curious about the system of the laundry. Indeed, the Protestant Magdalene laundries have been closed for decades at that time<sup>146</sup> and it can be estimated that Alexander tries to point this fact out.

Nora, being of a rough and wild nature, uses the first opportunity that occurs and escapes from the convent after months of confinement. When a van with a new delivery of laundry

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<sup>143</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 22:35.

<sup>144</sup> Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, 57.

<sup>145</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 7:17–7:27.

<sup>146</sup> Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 25.

arrived, Nora invisibly sidled to the boot of the car and hid herself in the laundry. It can be suggested that Nora's escape was inspired by the one that Christina Mulcahy made, also using a laundry vehicle.<sup>147</sup> Unprepared, Nora soon finds out that there are many obstacles on her way to independence, the biggest one being her appearance. Wearing the Magdalene uniform, she is suspicious to anyone she meets. Nora makes a big mistake by going home. Hoping that her parents would forgive her and take her back, she knocks on the door just to be rejected and punched in her face. This scenario is very similar to Christina Mulcahy's story. Expecting her family to be the people who would give her shelter, they were the ones who turned their backs on her and ejected her. They could not stand the shame their daughter has brought to the family.<sup>148</sup> As Connolly O'Brien advises the girls to choose the prison over the laundry because their reputation will be forever damaged<sup>149</sup>, Nora realises this and acts upon it. She no longer cares about her future because she believes her record in a Magdalene laundry will not let her live a happy life anyway. With this thought she is willing to go to bed with a police officer for not reporting her to the police and nuns. When Christina Mulcahy escaped from the convent, she had a good friend whom she could trust and there she went.<sup>150</sup> Unluckily, Nora ends up in the convent again. Moreover, she is pregnant. Apparently, Nora knows about the situation she has to face when she declares that "[she] can't have an abortion."<sup>151</sup> As is presented in the first part of this thesis, abortion is prohibited. Alexander through Teagan's character states that "[h]ere, [in the Magdalene laundry], all Nora had to look forward to was having the baby and putting it up for adoption"<sup>152</sup> because, as was explained before, the Magdalenes' children were either put up for adoption or fostered out.

It can be speculated that the move Nora made was due to her poor information about sex and its consequences. While she was engaging in the intercourse at the officer's flat, any thought of pregnancy or other consequences (apart from the loss of virginity) never crossed her mind. The poor sexual education provided in Ireland was mentioned many times throughout this work. The state did not consider it substantial to have the society informed about the issues of reproduction.

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<sup>147</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 38:31.

<sup>148</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 9:34–9:53.

<sup>149</sup> Éire, *Criminal Justice Bill*.

<sup>150</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 39:05–39:17.

<sup>151</sup> Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, 171.

<sup>152</sup> Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, 171.

Realising the prison-like conditions, Teagan knows that an escape without a careful preparation would not be successful and she wants to prepare a careful plan. With a help from Lea, Teagan manages to escape. Contrary to Nora, she has a friend she can trust and heads to Cullen's home. Opposite to disappointing her, Cullen lets her in and she gets some rest in a safe environment. The positive response reminds one of the fortunate circumstance of Christina Mulcahy's when she ran to her friend's house after she escaped from the Magdalene laundry and soon she left Ireland.<sup>153</sup> However, Teagan stayed in the city for too long and soon the police found her and brought her back to the laundry.

While Nora was enjoying her freedom, the other penitents were paying for her thoughtless action. None of the movements Phyllis Valentine delineated happens, except for "breaking the hell loose."<sup>154</sup> No alarm rang, the girls did not know about the breakout and the nuns appeared to be rather calm and unstressed. After all, it was the police whose duty was to find the escapee since the Church and state were tightly connected as is presented in the first part of this thesis. Only the Mother Superior made the Magdalenes suffer by burning their palms and showering them with icy water to make them understand that a sin must be punished and "[a]ll will be punished because one has sinned."<sup>155</sup> It could be deduced that Alexander's choice of punishment, presented in the novel, was quite moderate. Only once did the Mother Superior slap Teagan, other times she punished the girls differently, without using corporal punishment. This would include being locked in the dark room or lying for several hours on the floor in a shape of a cross. Regarding punishments and its consequences in a form of injuries, Finnegan states that the penitents were not delivered any health care.<sup>156</sup> However, Alexander writes about the health care relatively often. In fact, the penitents in *The Magdalen Girls* receive as much medical care as is needed. The nuns call for the doctors several times in case of a serious injury or childbirth, or dress a wound themselves if it is not anything of a big importance. They never leave the girls without providing treatment for them.

Alexander dedicated a part of his novel to a secret burial of babies within the walls of the convent. Lea and Teagan witness the nuns and a caretaker of the laundry digging a small hole during the night and they see them putting something in it. Afterwards, they pray and cover the hole. The girls believe there is something buried in the ground. This can be

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<sup>153</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 39:47.

<sup>154</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 38:51.

<sup>155</sup> Alexander, *The Magdalen Girls*, 130.

<sup>156</sup> Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 33.

compared to the babies not older than three years being found in the grounds of Tuam Mother and Baby Home in 2017. The scandalous story reveals that hundreds of children's remains were discovered in a septic tank.<sup>157</sup>

Although the priests are not illustrated in the convent of The Sisters of the Holy Redemption, Alexander describes the immoral actions of Father Mark, the handsome priest who is responsible for Teagan's departure from home. During his studies, before he became a priest, Father Mark would search for prostitutes to relieve his sexual desires. After numerous meetings with a particular one, the woman informs him about the fact that she is carrying his baby. Unable to face the reality, he decides not to contact the woman anymore and focus on his studies. When he meets Teagan, he feels lust for a woman again. To save his reputation, Teagan is sent to the laundry. Nevertheless, as time goes by, Father Mark feels pangs of conscience and he comes to visit her, asking for forgiveness. He plans to take her from the convent and be her guardian until she reaches the adulthood, as an act of his penitence. At this part of the novel Alexander idealises the actions of the priests. It was not common that a man of God comes to the penitent with a good intention. They were known (to the Magdalenes) as the ones who are abusive and lustful, as Brigid Young<sup>158</sup> and Christina Mulcahy<sup>159</sup> confessed. Teagan refuses his offer, sensing that it would be inappropriate to keep contact with a man who caused her incarceration.

### 3.4 Change of Behaviour and Closure

Eventually, Nora gives birth to her baby boy. After her short residence in a hospital, she returns to the convent with her child. Already acquainted with the boy's destiny, she knows he will be put up for an adoption as many of the children of Magdalenes were. Christina Mulcahy talks about her own experience of bringing an illegitimate child to this world, breastfeeding him for a short time and then having no time to say goodbye as she was leaving the convent.<sup>160</sup> Just like Christina Mulcahy who lost her child, Nora never saw her baby again, watching him suffocating in a great fire in the laundry. Lea, determined to save the child, dies in the fire with Jesus standing next to her. Following the tragedy, Nora loses her mind and becomes apathetic.

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<sup>157</sup> Alison O'Reilly, *My Name is Bridget: The Untold Story of Bridget Dolan and the Tuam Mother and Baby Home* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2018), 1–2.

<sup>158</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 34:05–35:03.

<sup>159</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 32:30–32:45.

<sup>160</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 8:14–8:58.

To Teagan's big surprise, she found herself changed. When the Anglican priest comes to visit her again, sits close to her and talks about her boyfriend, she realises it is wrong to think about a man. The same feelings aroused in Phyllis Valentine when she was with her husband. She says, "we got on very well, but I didn't like the sexual part of the marriage, I didn't like it at all, I felt that it was wrong . . . the nuns have told us it was wrong to let a man touch you."<sup>161</sup> Having spent almost a year with the nuns in the convent, Teagan's thoughts started to change, she was turning into the girl the nuns wanted her to be. In the end, Teagan is saved by her aunt living in America and she is released from the laundry. Rescued by a relative, Martha Cooney was one of the few who were able to leave the asylum and given a chance for a new life.<sup>162</sup> After her experience with the hypocritical priests and nuns, Phyllis Valentine has eliminated any religion from her life.<sup>163</sup> Teagan has the same intentions with another chapter of her existence.

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<sup>161</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 45:20–45:45.

<sup>162</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 41:33–42:35.

<sup>163</sup> *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Humphries, 48:42.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to analyse the portrayal of Magdalene laundries in two of few pieces of art concerning the topic, V. S. Alexander's fictional account, *The Magdalen Girls*, and Lisa Michelle Odgaard's *The Magdalen Laundries: A Novel Inspired by True Events*. Through the stories of the girls rejected by Irish society, the authors try to describe the challenging regime of the laundries and attempt to illustrate the perception of women entering and inhabiting the places. They both achieved to portray the relationship between the state and Church in a form of assistance of police in searching for the laundries' escapees. The relentless circumstances of breaking the moral rules are represented in placing the girls in the laundries after their purity has been jeopardised. The harsh conditions maintained by the Magdalene laundries are apparent from the beginning when the girls are deprived of their name and belongings. Even though Alexander's novel is of a fictional character, he depicts the system of the Catholic Magdalene laundries to a great extent truthfully and his story, regarding accuracy, can be compared to Odgaard's novel based on true events.

Odgaard managed to portray the Magdalene laundries with all the inhumanity the laundries are notorious for. Focusing on most of the facts concerning the convents, she accurately described the treatment of the penitents, difficult conditions, the evil character of nuns, the impure behaviour of priests, the awareness of the society about the Magdalene laundries, the deficiency of education or health care as well as the girls' feelings about the place. However, the novel lacks some details Magdalene survivors mention in their testimonies, such as having to give in their personal belongings and clothes, having their hair cut and their name taken away from them upon their arrival. Also, the manner of Maren's departure seems to be partially idealised.

Despite being a work of fiction, it can be speculated that Alexander chose to follow many examples of the real stories of Magdalenes as well as the undeniable facts generally known about the laundries. He did not forget to illustrate the role of Catholic Church in the Irish nation, shameful practices of nuns and priests, regime in the laundry and the lack of education on the topic of reproduction. However, *The Magdalen Girls* is sometimes, in terms of depicting the reality, rather romanticised. Even though the nuns are not amiable or graceful, they attempt to provide medical care every time it is necessary. Moreover, the relationships in this novel seem to be untouchable. Firstly, Teagan's mother does not intend to lose contact with her daughter when she sends Teagan a letter and some presents. Even though she disgraced the family, her mother still loves her. Secondly, Teagan's boyfriend



Cullen shows compassion and an absence of any judgemental thoughts. Further, it can be estimated that the act of being asked for forgiveness by Father Mark is invented.

To conclude, based on comparisons with the Magdalenes' testimonies and presented facts, both Odgaard and Alexander managed to describe the admission of the presumably immoral girls to the laundries and the system in the institution relatively accurately. However, they both romanticise their works to some extent. While Odgaard's *The Magdalen Laundries* reflects the reality in majority of cases, Alexander's *The Magdalen Girls* contains many situations which can be regarded as comparatively idealised.

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