

12-30-2019

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Recommended Citation

Ostalska, Katarzyna (2019) "'A right kind of rogue": Lisa McInerney's *The Glorious Heresies* (2015) and *The Blood Miracles* (2017)," *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*: Vol. 1 : No. 9 , Article 15.

DOI: 10.18778/2083-2931.09.15

Available at: <https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/textmatters/vol1/iss9/15>

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“A right kind of rogue”:
Lisa McInerney’s *The Glorious Heresies*
(2015) and *The Blood Miracles* (2017)

ABSTRACT

The following article analyzes two novels, published recently by a new, powerful voice in Irish fiction, Lisa McInerney: her critically acclaimed debut *The Glorious Heresies* (2015) and its continuation *The Blood Miracles* (2017). McInerney’s works can be distinguished by the crucial qualities of the Irish Noir genre. *The Glorious Heresies* and *The Blood Miracles* are presented from the perspective of a middle-aged “right-rogue” heroine, Maureen Phelan. Due to her violent and law-breaking revenge activities, such as burning down the institutions signifying Irishwomen’s oppression (i.e. the church and a former brothel) and committing an involuntary murder, Maureen remains a multi-dimensional rogue character, not easily definable or even identifiable. The focal character’s narrative operates around the abuse of unmarried, young Irish mothers of previous generations who were coerced to give up their “illegitimate” children for adoption and led a solitary existence away from them. The article examines other “options” available to “fallen women” (especially unmarried mothers) in Ireland in the mid-twenty century, such as the Magdalene Laundries based on female slave work, and sending children born “out of wedlock” abroad, or to Mother and Baby Homes with high death-rates. Maureen’s rage and her need for retaliation speak for Irish women who, due to the Church-governed moral code, were held in contempt both by their families and religious authorities. As a representative of the Irish noir genre, McInerney’s fiction depicts the narrative of “rogue” Irish motherhood in a non-apologetic, ironic, irreverent and vengeful manner.

Keywords: Lisa McInerney, Irish noir fiction, motherhood, Magdalene Laundries, the adoption discourse, the rogue discourse.

“[Y]ou’re a right rogue—maybe too much of a rogue to go to bingo with my nana, after all” (McInerney, *TBM* 114). These words are addressed to Maureen Phelan, a nearly sixty-year-old irreverent contemporary Mother Ireland figure forced to give up her “illegitimate” child for adoption, a revenge-seeking arsonist and an accidental murderess. Although Ms Phelan committed murder in self-defence, in an unpremeditated way, she became a deliberate, serial arsonist, acquiring a preference for this extreme form of civil disobedience. While setting fire to the institutional establishments which have oppressed Irishwomen, Maureen believed that “the smoke would belch into the air but everyone would feel cleaner after it. It had worked for the [Magdalene] Laundry, it had worked for Jimmy’s brothel, and it would work for the Catholic Church” (McInerney, *TGH* 293). To some extent, Maureen Phelan, one of the focal protagonists in Lisa McInerney’s novels *The Glorious Heresies* (2015) and *The Blood Miracles* (2017), constitutes a voice of conscience for an entire generation of unmarried Irish mothers, ignored, mistreated and silenced in the past.

In the main, McInerney’s fiction can be distinguished by the local, urban, working-class, specific socio-historical context, Hiberno-English dialect, and a distinctive way of relating events, simultaneously with detachment and reverence. *The Glorious Heresies* and *The Blood Miracles* are narrated from an ironic, non-pitiful, tragi-comic standpoint, as is evident, for instance, in the remark about Maureen: “Easier get a taste for arson than murder” (McInerney, *TGH* 280). With a wry wit which should not be mistaken for so-called British black humour, McInerney’s books belong to a socially-grounded condition of Ireland genre, otherwise defined as “Irish Noir.” Peterson explains that “Emerald Noir—aka Celtic Noir and Hibernian Homicide—has its roots in Ireland’s traumatic past, including the blip now known as the late Celtic Tiger” (108). Killeen admits that “[t]he Celtic Tiger turned out to be all shine and no substance, and beneath the surface glamour dark and mysterious forces continued to operate.” In line with that, Peterson cites Kincaid’s diagnosis, according to which, the Irish noir genre unearthed the layers of “the disillusionment and self-doubt,” hidden beneath apparent personal and economic success (108). Killeen remarks bitterly: “Indeed, eerily empty houses, malevolent patriarchs and clerics, abused innocence, all seem to be with us once more.” Among key structural features characteristic of the Irish noir genre, Mannion distinguishes “witty dialogue, atmospheric settings and rich characterisation. . . . murder as the most common crime, a focus on fractured families” (2) and, in general, the “engagement with contemporary social issues” (9). She rightly observes that “[t]he majority of Irish detective series touch on historical scars or legacies of nation” (Mannion 3–4). Mannion stresses that a crucial part of the Irish Noir

genre operates around its scrutiny of the Catholic Church’s role in the past and in the present life of the country: “Examination of nation-Church complicity in the legacy of domestic violence and clerical abuse of children is also commonplace, as are, with increasing frequency, the austerity of economics of the post-Celtic Tiger years” (4).

Since McInerney’s novels possess all of these attributes and more, it is due to her unique perspective on the present-day Irish reality that the author was granted by the *Irish Times* the honourable rank of “the most talented writer at work in Ireland today” (Doyle). As stressed by Mannion, Ireland-based realities have recently become a sought-after quality in (crime) fiction (9). The two-year later continuation of *The Glorious Heresies*, titled *The Blood Miracles* (2017), strengthened McInerney’s position not only as a promising new novelist but also as an established writer.

Before becoming a novelist, McInerney had made a name for herself as an author of the famed blog *Arse End of Ireland* which, instead of depicting Cork as a picturesque, two-cathedral historic city with the National University of Ireland education, high-tech business and European IT centre, focused on its less prosperous regions, lowlife, prowlers, precariat and destitute inhabitants. In an interview with *The Guardian*, McInerney declares: “it was Cork city that made a writer out of me. . . . [I] was . . . interested in the peculiarities of Corkonian Hiberno-English and the geography of the city” (McInerney, “If cities have characters”). Referring to Cork in *The Blood Miracles* (2017), the narrator admits:

This city, like all cities, hates its natives. It would rather be in a constant state of replenishment than own up to what it has warped. Ryan sees it well enough: tribes in town, hipster baristas and skinny suits and the tides of students pushing the rest of them back up the hills. . . . the men who sleep on the street are alcoholics, the girls who stop you and ask for money are alcoholics; that’s Cork’s damage. . . . People lose their jobs, people can’t pay their rent. . . (54)

While looking back critically at Irish history, McInerney’s novels are set in present-day Cork’s shady districts, rookeries and impoverished social housing areas. The particular location and types of dwelling are of great significance in this essentially regional fiction. The murder in *The Glorious Heresies* takes place in a building where, until recently, the brothel owned by Vietnamese criminals used to operate. Maureen’s son, Jimmy Phelan, one of Cork’s leading criminal bosses, placed his mother there, and it is where she killed Robbie O’Donovan, a petty crook and

a drug addict, who broke into her house. Hence, McInerney's readers get to know "a right rogue," Maureen Phelan, after her fatal deed and mostly due to that action.

What is more, Maureen enters the narrative not only as a murderess but also as a believer. The protagonist's faith in God and in the existence of the spiritual world equals her disappointment with the organized religion in Ireland. Maureen's attitude toward the Church is symptomatic of her generation. Hilliard's study proves that "many women ceased to go to mass or to receive sacraments. Some of these, although alienated from the Church, continued other forms of religious observance, including personal prayer, the use of holy water and veneration for statues and blessed medals" (156). Ms Phelan collects the "holy souvenirs" connected with Catholic faith, and it is with such an object that she strikes a burglar. Relating the course of events to her son, Maureen responds mordantly: "Belted him,' she said. 'With the Holy Stone. I wasn't giving up the upper hand on the off-chance he was Santy Claus'" (McInerney, *TGH* 15). The high register ("the Holy Stone") becomes intermingled with its low, slang idiom of "belt," meaning to strike. As shown, the narrator enunciates the line of the religious discourse, signalled by the type of the weapon seized upon during the murder, and extended by negation upon the image of an intruder (not being a saint). It is precisely the unusual lethal object that Maureen employed in her self-defence, and not so much her murderous deed, that attracted the attention of her felonious son, Jimmy. And even at this early stage, one can formulate the main argument of the narrative: phoney religion can be a deadly armament against people.

In *The Glorious Heresies*, the Holy Stone is rendered with much attention to the detail:

A flat rock, about a fistful, painted gold and mounted on polished wood, with a picture of the Virgin Mary holding Chubby Toddler Jesus printed on one side in bright Celtic colours, and the bloody essences of the dead man on the kitchen floor smeared and knotted on top. (15)

Due to his criminal mind, Jimmy suspects that the rock was painted by a swindler who wanted to take advantage of religious people's naivety. Following this line, he envisages "a car boot sale" for which the object could have been generated. Maureen's kitsch stone seems to belong to cheap Catholic worship souvenirs, such as "[r]ows of Virgin Mary barometers; her fuzzy cloak would change colour depending on the weather, which was very miraculous. Toy cameras with preloaded images of the shrine; . . . many sticks of rock" (McInerney, *TGH* 20). Even at this stage, shoddy commercialization of the spiritual indicates the fall

of the principles for the sake of the business venture. By contrast, in McInerney's account, the remains of the living tissue and human blood spilt upon the rock/murder weapon appear to subscribe to the mystery of transubstantiation. What is more, in *The Glorious Heresies*, the inadvertent "sacrifice" performed by Maureen leads to the spiritual transformation of numerous characters in the course of the novel. The imagery of the blood tissue (compare with "the Christian fissure") resurfaces in the concept of the nation's open wound: the generation of Irish children given away to enforced adoption, coerced by the Catholic church. Maureen comments upon it: "So many other boys and girls grew up with holes in their chests gaping as wide as the Christian fissure that had spat them into the world" (McInerney, *TGH* 189).

During the post-murder scene, the readers' attention is diverted from the act of killing to a mother-son bonding conversation during which they struggle to re-establish the connection and get to know each other better. Because Jimmy and his biological parent were separated for a long time, they are uncertain of what to expect of each other. They each use the fatal opportunity to find out more about the other. This way, the critical moment is also a cognitive one for them. Jimmy begins: "I didn't take you for a Holy Josephine." "You wouldn't want to, because I'm not" (McInerney, *TGH* 15), his mother replies. According to Catholic Online, before joining the Canossian Daughters of Charity, Saint Josephine Bakhita of Sudan (canonized in 2000 by Pope John Paul II) was a slave kidnapped by Arabs, tortured for years and sold from hand to hand. Despite her emotional and physical ordeal, Saint Josephine remained a forgiving, merciful and compassionate person, due to her conversion to Christianity. Her "gentle voice and smile" contributed to the appellation of a "black mother" ("St. Josephine Bakhita"). With the above in mind, one can see clearly why Maureen has established her own "rogue" identity in negation of that self-sacrificial motherly image.

From the way the conversation is recounted in *The Glorious Heresies*, it seems that Jimmy and his mother have problems in relating to this unexpected turn of events. The son dryly confronts his mother: "You just collect bulky religious souvenirs to use as murder weapons, is it? No one ever suspects the heavy hand of the Lord" (McInerney, *TGH* 15). Maureen quickly resumes the similar ironic rhetoric to subvert the Church saying: "The Lord works in mysterious ways" (15). As argued by Purdy, the original citation is derived from William Cowper's hymn "God moves in a mysterious way." With drug lords, his immediate superiors, in mind, Jimmy derides his mother's religious idiom to shift the narrative into the familiar world of crime: "I know a few lords like that all right" (McInerney, *TGH* 15). This way, the idiom of corruption and wrongdoing

gets textually equated with religious discourse. Both mother and her son have got powerful bosses who govern their lives and determine their fate. They both correspondingly feel powerless in the face of a mighty force, whether supernatural or criminal. As tends to happen with complicated family relationships, guilt and hurt resurface in mutual accusations and blame. When Maureen complains that her son should not have left her alone in the disreputable house, Jimmy retorts: “It’s you who made it like this.’ . . . I’ll get you a cat” (16). That final, seemingly offhand remark indicates that Jimmy does not really know how to be “a son” to his mother and how to take care of her in an affectionate way.

As a hardened criminal, Jimmy does not seem to be stunned by Maureen’s violent act but rather by his mother’s capability of it and its effectiveness. He admits: “So how Maureen had managed to kill an intruder was beyond him” (14). To some extent, he even admires his mother for her instant reaction: “she was such an odd fish as to be capable of impromptu executions” (17). Considered from a different angle, Jimmy is apprehensive about his own reputation and his endangered prestige in the underworld, which will be diminished, if news about his bloodthirsty mother is to spread among his fellow criminals. Then again, it is Jimmy to whom the narrator attributes empathetic understanding of how much the stone might have, symbolically, meant to his parent. Viewed from this perspective, the stone signifies Maureen’s alleged sin of illegitimate motherhood. The speaker in *The Glorious Heresies* speculates:

And so supposing the Holy Stone symbolised something to Maureen. Repentance. Humility. New beginnings. Supposing smashing it off the skull of an intruder set her back forty years. How much healing did a fallen woman require, if she had the whole of Ireland’s fucked up psyche weighing her down to purgatory? (21)

Maureen’s decision to inform her delinquent son about the murder and her subsequent request for his assistance to dispose of the dead body seems a practical way out of the challenging predicament. The casualty, Robbie O’Donovan, was an intruder and a drug addict who tried to rob an older woman. Maureen is fully convinced that she needed to protect her life, referring to Robbie as: “Dirty tramp. Robbing all around them. I’m just the type they target” (16). On the one hand, one may comprehend that a senior citizen, living alone and surprised at night by an intruder, decided to defend herself. On the other hand, readers, earlier acquainted in the narrative with the deceased, are aware that O’Donovan was not a violent, toughened criminal or a callous person. It even remains plausible to assume that the burglar may not have constituted a real

threat to Maureen's life. Bearing this in mind, Ms Phelan's behaviour may be *post factum* interpreted as excessively violent; and the woman's subsequent composure does not aid her case either. Taking into account the catastrophic circumstances, Maureen appears to be in total control and capable of thinking in a logical way. What may strike one is Maureen's consistent reluctance to report the incident to Gardaí. Even though Ms Phelan is aware that she has taken somebody's life, she does not consider turning herself in and facing the consequences of her lethal act. As shown, McInerney does not make it unproblematic for the audience to sympathize with Maureen instantaneously.

Maureen herself does not try to minimize the fact that she has killed a man. To Tony Cusack who came to remove the corpse, she responds sarcastically: "I see you looking at me like I might crack you open too, but I'm telling you, 'twasn't the way I'd planned to spend my morning" (McInerney, *TGH* 47). She yearns for deliverance but, at the same time, is aware that she is not entitled to it:

Maureen was seeking redemption. Not for herself. You don't just kill someone and get forgiven; they'd hang you for a lot less. No, she was seeking redemption like a pig sniffs for truffles: rooting it out, turning it over, mad for the taste of it, resigned to giving it up. (79)

Ms Phelan does not give herself the right to be forgiven. In her own sense of right and wrong, as a murderess, she does not deserve it. Maureen killed Robbie because she no longer wished to be a victim. Other people abused her in the past, and she finally decided to stand up for herself. And although she did it with a fatal outcome, Maureen does not repent. As she says, over the past forty years, she atoned enough for the rest of her life.

The discourse of penance brings one back to Catholic doctrine. Ms Phelan believes in the afterlife and she regularly engages in an active dialogue with the victim of her self-defence. Hilliard proves that "although the relationship between the Church [could] . . . be raptured, it was by no means the case that they had no longer any means of religious expression or abandoned a spiritual dimension in their lives" (158). Robbie O'Donovan, as an imaginary ghost, haunts and lives with Maureen in the former brothel where he died. The deceased man becomes an emanation of the murderer's sense of morals. She admits with honesty "How easy it was to kill someone, really, much easier than it had any right to be" (McInerney, *TGH* 79). Furthermore, it is via her monologues with Robbie that readers become acquainted with the personal details of Maureen's life. She talks to the dead man, trying to appease the ghost by telling him the story of her woe. With the course of time, she embraces the ghost like her

long abandoned son. Ms Phelan befriends Robbie and confides in him; she mothers and mourns him. Moreover, in her soliloquies, she preserves the memory of Robbie. And instead of indulging in self-pity and contrition, Maureen focuses her compassion on the departed: “*Robbie O’Donovan*, said her conscience. *Poor craitur*. *Had a name once, and a body, before you offered both to the worms . . .* No guards, no wives, no mummies. *Poor craitur*,” (79, emphasis added). In Hiberno-English the sound “i:” can be realized as the diphthong “ei.” In *Accents of English*, Wells clarifies that this feature happens most often in “old-fashioned . . . speech [and] the usage is recessive” (425). Furthermore, Wells provides an example of the stereotypical, clichéd *Jaysus* pronunciation, employed as “a joke or as a conscious Hibernicism” (425). As for other examples of Irish-English variation, McInerney’s novels include, for example, the popular *eejit* for idiot (i.e. *TGH* 6, 91).

It is the lack of family support and closer connections that incites in Maureen sympathy for the dead Robbie. It indicates that, for Ms Phelan, relations with others constitute the sense and the essence of human existence. On the symbolic level, as hinted in the introductory paragraph, Maureen is an iconic Mother Ireland, whose personal fate (and faith) is intertwined with the highs and lows of the whole nation. Talking of his mother, Jimmy admits: “She’s got your children’s history. . . . Ireland’s history in there” (McInerney, *TGH* 19). Valiulis reminds one that “the ideal Irish woman . . . was first and foremost a mother who inculcated in her children, her sons in particular, a love of country, of Gaelic culture and tradition, of freedom for Ireland” (117). She argues that womanhood was seen as synonymous with motherhood, and motherhood as tantamount with rights for women as vital parts of the Irish society (117–19). Maureen in McInerney’s fiction is defined by motherhood denied to her; her (lost) motherhood has affected her entire life. For unprincipled Jimmy, being estranged from his parent led to him losing his ethical standards. Maureen blames her own parents’ preoccupation with religion (“much in cahoots with the Man Above” [McInerney, *TGH* 126]), and her shattered reputation for the fact that her son “has no morals at all and he’s turned to a life of crime” (126). Jimmy’s last trace of uncorrupted humanity is the bond with the mother he has recently reunited with. The narrator ironically admits that Jimmy Phelan “had a yearning for: imported flesh, Cognac, his long-lost mother” (13). The mocking order of this list reveals the priorities in his life: human traffic of women from abroad for sex, drinking for pleasure, and maternal love for his emotional stability. In addition, Jimmy’s ultimate and maybe sole act of decency is realized in finding his mother in London, bringing her back to Ireland and protecting her at any cost. “Rogue” motherhood remains the central theme of the first, and to

some extent, the second of McInerney's novels. With all the reservations against "biographical analysis," the author suggests and problematizes this trope in her interview titled "If cities have characters then this one's a brilliant brat":

I don't have a fixed origin story. I was born to an unmarried 19-year-old and quickly adopted by her parents because Ireland would otherwise have classed me as illegitimate. I'm either the cherished baby of the family or a symptom of my country's troubled relation with religion.

In *The Glorious Heresies*, Maureen Phelan gave birth to her "out-of-the-wedlock" son Jimmy when she was of the same age as McInerney's biological mother and the child was also adopted by grandparents for the same reason, as stated in the interview above. As shown by Conway after Kirk, adoption in case of "illegitimate," non-marital birth was recommended as "the optimum solution," both with regard to the child and the mother who was expected to act as if nothing had happened, leave the past behind her and never look back (186). However, mothers forced to give up their children had to struggle on their own with "the pain of relinquishment . . . [that] shattered their lives" and "the loss intensified over time, linked to a lack of knowledge about the development of their child" (Conway 186), as was the case with Maureen in McInerney's novels. Jimmy's father, Dominic Looney, abandoned her and their unborn child, never to return. His desertion, as the woman admits, in the eyes of the world, "made a whore and a charlatan out of the pair of us" (McInerney, *TGH* 81). Nonetheless, Ms Phelan did not regret being left by a man whom she regarded as a coward, and she courageously confronted the situation on her own, bearing in mind all her "options: the stairs, the coat hanger, the boiling baths" (187). But regardless of social ostracism and the stigma of shame, she decided to keep her "illegitimate" baby, and she "announced her misdeed with the bravado of scientific detachment" (187).

With reference to her Cork-based study, regarding the period of the 1950s and the 1960s, published in the article "Motherhood, Sexuality and the Catholic Church," Hilliard claims that at that time in Ireland "[h]aving a child outside of marriage was particularly censured" (149). Maureen's parents, especially her devout Catholic mother Una, defamed their pregnant daughter as a "fallen woman." Hilliard proves that such an approach was not uncommon among mature, married women who followed the teachings of the Catholic Church in Ireland including in the sphere of procreation. In the early to mid-twenty century, women had limited knowledge of their own bodies, female sexuality or even conception, not to mention birth control

(Hilliard 140–42). Sexual activity was discussed mostly with regard to marital relations, and it was not perceived to have “a recreational dimension” (143). In *The Glorious Heresies*, from Una’s viewpoint, sex was only allowed in marriage, otherwise it became a “stain” (McInerney, *TGH* 186). In line with the above, Una was ashamed of her daughter who “had brought the devil into the family” (187). Hence, forsaken by her man, condemned by the Church and the conservative society, Maureen suffered from the additional trauma of rejection and humiliation from the people who should support her. With regard to Una, “[h]er own daughters she saw as treacherous vixens. . . She hated the hair under their arms . . . the blood that confirmed they were ready for sin” (186). Shortly after Jimmy was born, “it was decided that I give him up in atonement so that my mother and father could raise him in the stable and proper home” (81). Addressing Robbie’s ghost, Maureen exclaims: “I’ve done all my redeeming, forty **bleddy** years of it, why in God’s name do you think I should be seeking redemption for you?” (81, emphasis added). Over again, Maureen’s speech, especially when she becomes emotive or relates to the times of “Old Catholic Ireland,” discloses the conspicuous Hiberno-English patterns. The separation from her son is what comes as the worst, formative life experience from which Maureen never fully recovered. As the person who allegedly disgraced her family, she was sent abroad to seek employment in London. Before Jimmy found her, she lived “on exile,” alone, shamed and separated from her the rest of her family. However, what happened to Maureen was not the worst development that could occur to a young, unmarried mother in Ireland in the 1970s. Una’s first preferable choice was to refer her daughter to the convent “*behind the high walls*” “to appease sour-faced nuns” (187). But, as the narrator reminds, “the tide was turning” (187) and social codes in Ireland began to change.

Maureen’s subplot in *The Glorious Heresies* and *The Blood Miracles* is the narrative of many young Irishwomen who, in the past, were not allowed to raise their “illegitimate” children. Women like Ms Phelan were expected to hide their “sin” from the world and deny their “illegitimate” motherhood; such self-deception would result, however, in serious psychological traumas and irrecoverable emotional damages (Milotte). The most dismaying possible scenario involved infamous Magdalene Laundries where “fallen women” worked beyond human endurance for many years and where many died prematurely because of chlorine, malnutrition or neglect.

From the time of the Potato Famine until the early 1970s, the “fallen women” of Ireland, unmarried mothers, who had broken the sixth or ninth commandments, scrubbed the society’s dirty clothes. Betrayed by lovers, signed in by families or guardians, they lived a spartan and loveless existence. (Burke Brogan 161)

Ms Phelan was ready to take her own life if she were compelled to do “her penance up to her elbows in soap and steam in the Laundry” (McInerney, *TGH* 187). She admits: “if it weren’t for the Magdalene Laundry being on its last, bleached-boiled legs I would have been up there scrubbing sheets for the country. Instead I was exiled” (127). In theory, the aim of Magdalene Laundries was to “protect, reform, and rehabilitate” young women before reinstating them in the society. In his monograph *Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Confinement*, Smith explains that

Ireland’s architecture of containment encompassed an assortment of interconnected institutions, including mother and baby homes, industrial and reformatory schools, mental asylums, adoption agencies and Magdalene laundries. These institutions concealed citizens already marginalized by a number of interrelated social phenomena: poverty, illegitimacy, sexual abuse, and infanticide. . . . In a still-decolonizing society . . . the prescribed national narrative . . . emphasized conformity, valued community over the individual, and esteemed conservative Catholic moral values. (xiii)

Smith underlines that apart from features that could be found in other Magdalene institutions worldwide (“a regime of prayer, silence, work in a laundry, and a preference for permanent inmates”) what distinguished Irish Magdalene establishments was their uninterrupted endurance until the 1980s (the last establishment of this sort is reported by Cooper to have been closed down in 1996), their being more involved in the national discourse and less open to public scrutiny (xv). In her book *Origins of Magdalene Laundries: An Analytical History* McCarthy elucidates that in Ireland, the process of magdalenization acquired a more extreme formula, because it was believed that “a women’s worth could only be measured as unpaid labor in the home as wife and mother first. . . . [i]f a woman rejected these roles, she forfeited her rights as a citizen” (9). Thus, as emphasized by McCarthy, the damage to the so-called respectable status of womanhood, involved damage to woman’s social, national and constitutional rights. Drawing upon Inglis, Smith argues that in post-famine Ireland,

the unmarried mother and her illegitimate child presented a serious threat to the economic stability of men newly converted to the benefits of capital accumulation. Illegitimacy tolerated under the Ireland’s indigenous Brehon Law, became strongly prohibited, transforming the unfortunate mother and child into social pariahs. (27–28)

Power in *Sex and Marriage in Ancient Ireland* reminds one that under the Brehon Law the concept of an illegitimate child did not exist (33). It

happened because “[a]ll children born to a woman, no matter what the circumstances of their conception, were legislated for and their rights recognised” (33). After Connell, Smith states that in modern Ireland the dishonour of illegitimacy was transferred (“inherited”) from one generation of children to another (28). The reason for such long-lasting and irredeemable shaming results from the fact that women were seen as “responsible for providing the mainstay of a new bourgeois Catholic morality, [and] they were severely punished for the failing to uphold the implicit, requisite standards” (Smith 28). One needs to add the dishonour of prostitution connected with the inmates of this place.

Smith notes that the history of Magdalene Laundries in Ireland goes back to as early as 1767 when the first establishment, re-educating and morally rehabilitating in its goals, designed specifically for “fallen women”¹ was founded in Dublin (25). The agenda behind choosing the name goes back to the Bible: “the name appropriates Mary Magdalene as a role model for repentance and spiritual regeneration” (Smith 25). McCarthy claims that Jesus’s forgiveness and his absolution of sins involved “the masculinization of Magdalene,” which required of her renouncing womanhood and un-gendering (20–21). “Her ‘sins’ have been forgiven but stains of her sins remain” (Burke Brogan 164). Smith clarifies that apart from former prostitutes, Irish Magdalene Laundries comprised a much more diverse spectrum of inmates, i.e. women whose morality was questioned, women who were deemed as socially incorrigible, mentally disabled, sent by court order, or who were expelled from other kinds of reformatory schools (xv). Explaining the rationale for his full-length study, Smith defines Magdalene’s women as “the nation’s disappeared”:

They did not matter, or matter enough, in a society that sought to negate and render invisible the challenges they embodied: they were sexually active when Irish women were expected to be morally pure; they were unmarried mothers of “illegitimate” children when the constitution rendered motherhood and marriage inseparable; they were women who killed their babies when the symbolic icon of Mother Ireland would not allow for this material contradiction, they were the victims of physical and sexual abuse by men under a legal double standard that evaded male culpability and condemned female victims as criminals. . . . the Magdalene asylum existed as a place to contain and/or punish the threatening embodiment of instability. (xvii)

¹ Unlike in some studies (i.e. Smith) that tend to employ this strategy selectively, the article uses consistently inverted commas of the stigmatic terms of the past throughout.

In his study, Smith stresses the scarcity of the available written record concerning Magdalene Laundries from the twentieth century onwards (24). He argues that the official discourse wishes to present them as nineteenth-century institutions rather than modern ones. Although apologies to Magdalene Laundries’ victims were given by Bertie Ahern in 1999, and by Taoiseach Enda Kenny in 2013, the state seems reluctant to provide the women in question with appropriate financial compensation (Smith 184–85). Moreover, only one Irish religious congregation (Sisters of Mercy) openly acknowledged their culpability in 2004, others seem unwilling to admit their involvement, or even to co-operate by opening their archives to the public inquiry (Smith 185–86). Despite relatively comprehensive media coverage of this phenomenon, both in documentary and fictive forms, the lack of justice paid to the survivors, or even “local initiatives to memorialize the victims of Ireland’s Magdalene laundries suggests a resistance to claiming ownership of this more personal and immediate history” (Smith 187). After all, as Smith reminds us, Irish families used to send their unmarried daughters, and local communities supported such establishments by giving them dirty washing to clean (186). As stated by Raftery,

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Irish society was deeply complicit in the incarceration of women and girls in the laundries. In what has been described as a culture of containment, Ireland locked up more of its citizens per capita than anywhere else in the world—not in prisons, but in psychiatric hospitals, Magdalene laundries and industrial schools. Anyone who did not fit within the cruelly narrow definition of good behaviour was in danger.

Therefore, in the light of the above, Maureen’s rogue crusade in *The Glorious Heresies* and *The Blood Miracles* becomes more understandable. Hilliard reports that, among interviewed Cork women who became mothers in the mid-twentieth century, “the feelings of hurt, confusion and, eventually, anger” with regard to the Church’s approach to the regulating of female sexuality was prevalent (150). She further adds, as if bearing Maureen in mind: “In some cases, the desperation of their lives and the perceived harshness of the Church elicited a more immediate sense of injustice and anger” (Hilliard 150).

Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Confinement highlights that it was no sooner than in the 1990s that the truth about Magdalene Laundries was brought to light (Smith 87). This was also a time when female victims of sexual violence, domestic aggression, molestation, illegal and enforced adoptions, and incest-related traumas could disclose their hurt openly in public (Smith 88). McCarthy reminds us that, in 1993, since the Church sold the land remaining within

the jurisdiction of the sisters of Our Lady of Charity, they exhumed 133 corpses² of Magdalene laundresses buried there, cremated their bones and put their ashes in an anonymous, collective grave (8). A million pound transaction with the developer involved removing the remains of the dead women and trashing them like disposable waste. How the suppressed narratives and bodies of Magdalene inmates came to light indicates the extent of the conspiracy of silence that continued for generations. As stated in Gavan Reilly's article "In Their Own Words: Survivors' Accounts of Life inside a Magdalene Laundry," even after all the years, not all women who were in these institutions, seem willing to give a testimony to what they experienced there. According to the article, apart from some reported cases of sexual, physical abuse, humiliating women on the grounds of their illegitimacy was a common strategy as much as their involuntary, prolonged indefinitely containment in the corrective institution. Lloyd-Roberts stresses that Magdalene inmates could stay there for as long as fourteen years (Mary Merritt) up to over fifty (Mary Brehany). Redmond openly defines their status as convicts who sometimes remained on the premises for their whole lives. They were exposed to various forms of mistreatment, including starvation and working arduously beyond their strength. One of the survivors, Elizabeth Coppin, sums up the situation: "It was slave labour" (Lloyd-Roberts). Lloyd-Roberts explains the rationale for this unpaid exploitation, extended over many years, frequently performed by juvenile staff, ten hours daily. Drawing upon *The Irish Examiner*, due to the commissions from local entrepreneurs, unpaid women's work provided the church an enormous gain over the years (in 2012, the capital of Orders profiting from the laundry-related business was estimated at around 1.5 billion euros) (Lloyd-Roberts).

In her foreword to Redmond's study, Clare Daly makes one aware of the scale of the procedure of mistreating "illegitimate" children in Mother and Baby Homes in Ireland:

Approximately 100, 000 girls and women lost their babies to forced separation since independence in 1922. Church and State considered the illegitimate babies as barely human. At least 6,000 babies died in the nine Mother and Baby Homes where some 35,000 girls as young as 12, and women as old as 44, spent years of their lives, and almost no one cared. Even now, mothers and babies still cry out for remembrance and justice.

Furthermore, in McInerney's novels, Maureen speaks about/for women whose "out-of-the wedlock" children were sent away for adoption

² Cooper provides a number of 155 exhumed bodies.

to America, as a part of an extensive and structured procedure conducted with the highest Church (the former archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid) and state officials’ approval (The Department of External Affairs), as evidenced by Milotte in his book.³ Ms Phelan refers to such children as “the exported generation” (McInerney, *TGH* 189). The mothers of these babies were frequently separated from them “at an hour’s notice,” with their “breasts still heavy with milk” (188). Recurrently, “[n]atural mothers had died, returned unto dust by the chemicals in the laundries” (189). According to Milotte, illegal and frequently enforced adoptions of not just orphaned but in most cases “illegitimate” Irish children (arranged by nuns) were not properly supervised with regard to screening future American parents. Milotte’s study indicates that single mothers were either lured by unverified visions of the better American life for their children or simply coerced into giving their offspring away. Moreover, the whole problem was dismissed for years because “[a]doption was seen as . . . not part of the continuum of abuse and domination” (Milotte). “Illegitimate” babies (referred to as “tainted outcasts,” as argued by the author of *Banished Babies: The Secret History of Ireland’s Baby Export Business*) conspicuously signified women’s moral fall, and, therefore, they had to be removed from public view—preferably sent away abroad. Unmarried pregnant women were pushed to the margins of the Irish society due to their sexuality and their forbidden, “unspeakable scandalous act”—as their motherhood was labelled at that time, according to Milotte. In *The Glorious Heresies* Maureen recalls those times in her confession with a priest:

Times were tough and the people were harsh and the clergy were cruel—cruel, and you know it! The most natural thing in the world is giving birth; you built your whole religion around it. And yet you poured pitch on girls like me and sold us into slavery and took our humanity from us twice, a third time, as often as you could. I was lucky, Father. I was only sent away. A decade earlier and where would I have been? I might have died in your asylums, me with the smart mouth. I killed one man but you would have killed me in the name of your god, wouldn’t you? (128)

As argued before, Maureen believes in God but she does not believe in institutional religion, especially the Catholic Church. Clergymen in Ireland represent to her the power that judged and condemned women unfairly. She accuses the clergy of hypocrisy, asking: “How many lives did you destroy with your morality” (128). With regard to principles, Ms Phelan notices: “the ritual is more powerful than the killing. What’s

³ Due to the whole procedure’s secrecy and the lack of available to scrutiny records, the exact figures of exported children cannot be provided (Milotte).

tied to the earth is less important than what's tied to the heavens. You're crosser about my language in the confessional than you are about the fact that I killed a man" (127). Maureen, with her own bitter experiences of denied motherhood and the knowledge of scandals involving clergymen, "withdrew acceptance of the validity of the Church's claims to authority and the willingness to be bound by this authority" (Hilliard 157). She proved herself capable of critical thinking and pointing out the Church's own flaws and vices. It was not only due to "paedophile priests, abuse of authority," "irresponsibility" but also "bullying and lack of compassion" that made the Catholic Church lose "the position of moral authority" in Ireland and the trust of its believers (Hilliard 156–57).

Being "a right kind of rogue," Maureen remains the voice of integrity in McInerney's *The Glorious Heresies* and *The Blood Miracles*: her life and her choices are always grounded in some moral imperatives. For her own self-respect, Maureen had to rely upon her own ruling of what is right or wrong. The authority of the Church has failed and Maureen mistrusts priests and their guidance. The tendency is representative of what has been going on in Ireland for the last twenty years. It started with disclosing a number of paedophile and sex scandals, involving prominent clergymen in Ireland, especially the famous Bishop Casey case (Hilliard 152). During her confession, Ms Phelan shows no reverence for or fear of the priest who hears her. The study conducted by Hilliard reveals Irish women's rage at "the hypocritical stance taken by priests," and their "sense of betrayal and loss at length," "[c]oupled with . . . a sense of disillusionment with societal leaders in general as role models" (152). Maureen owns up to murder, knowing that the clergyman will not be able to report it to the police. It is her act of defiance. In her alleged declaration of guilt, Maureen mockingly states: "A sixty-year-old woman. . . . Do you think that's how the bingo brigade get their kicks? Confessing crimes to priests?" (McInerney, *TGH* 125).

Apart from becoming an involuntary murderess, Maureen is a deliberate arsonist who believes in purification through fire. She is attracted to the ceremonial aspect of purging. If Catholic confession is supposed to purge sins from one's soul, the fire started by Maureen is intended to cleanse the sins of the Church in Ireland. The idea comes from visiting, in Cork, a place burnt to the ground where the Magdalene Laundry used to be in the past. Hearing her declaration of intention "[t]o set another fire" (McInerney, *TGH* 190), Ryan Cusack reaffirms Maureen: "Nothing as cleansing as a fire" (190). Walking away from the location, Maureen feels the heat of the place, "she felt uneasy walking away, like the bitterness soldered to the past and to the ground the past was built on had touched her, and marked her. There were places this city wanted no one to tread" (191). In *The Glorious Heresies*, such areas in Cork are compared to the putrid wound,

the places that were meant to hide from view the chastizing of women going on "*behind the high walls*" (186). Therefore, fire in McInerney's fiction obtains a ritualistic, spiritual and "glorious" dimension.

With murder she found a definite crossed line, and it was hair-breadth. One second there was life, and the next it was gone. The ultimate in finality. Once you cross over you can never go back.

Arson was a different thing and a glorious thing. It was a monument to its own ritual. (*TGH* 280)

In an act of civil disobedience, Maureen burns down the former brothel where she once lived; where other women's bodies were sold like commodities and where she killed a man with no intent. She "accidentally-on-purpose left the candles by the curtains and burned her house down" (280). The oxymoronic phrase "accidentally-on-purpose" renders the contradictory feelings in Maureen's mind: on the one hand, committing a criminal act, on the other, denying the lawbreaking character of her revenge on Irish history. Fire is supposed to consume the sins of the nation, and it signifies to Ms Phelan her nearly political "statement into the sky" (280). Burning the place down also signifies a rebellion against her criminal son who forced her to stay there. With relief, she repeats after Ryan: "Nothing as cleansing as a fire" (284). The second object of Maureen's arson is the old parish church in Mitchelstown. She does not hide her arsonist transgressions and she is proud of her cathartic deeds. When explaining her motives, Ms Phelan manages to shock even her criminal son with her law-breaking rationale: "It's a pyre, isn't it? For *that* Ireland. For *their* nonsense. For the yoke they stuck around our necks" (305, emphasis original).

Furthermore, in *The Glorious Heresies* and *The Blood Miracles*, Ms Phelan functions as a guardian angel that protects and saves the lives of other younger characters. She protects Georgie, a pregnant drug abuser and a former prostitute, despite the fact that it was in order to obtain money for drugs for Georgie that Robbie tried to rob her. Ms Phelan identifies with Georgie as with another Irish "unfit mother" tempted to sell away her child to his wealthy grandparents. In *The Glorious Heresies*, Georgie functions like a contemporary "little Magdalene, with a bellyful of sins," "a fallen angel [who] came to the door, looking to earn back her wings" (244). Georgie's mother was devotedly religious as Maureen's parent, and Ms Phelan feels infuriated with the model of Catholicism that makes mothers condemn and reject their "disgraced" daughters: "ah for **feck's** sake altogether. . . what's wrong with this country at all that it can't stop birthing virtuous **ould** bags" (247, emphasis added). "Sentence First"

explains that Hiberno-English *feck* in its slang form can be used as a socially acceptable swear form. As devoid of sexual undertones, it is used by Irish writers in their fiction or even in standard advertisements. According to the same source, *feck* is claimed to denote “to steal or throw,” the word most likely comes from an Old Irish *fec* or *feic*, meaning “to see,” or Old English *feccan*, “obtain.” In the case of *ould*, Wells argues that “Irish oddity of lexical incidence whereby /au/ rather than /o:/ . . . may be restricted to jocular or non-literal use” (427). Accordingly, in *The Glorious Heresies* this usage brings one back again to the times of “Old Catholic Ireland” in its derisive and derogatory way. Ms Phelan calls Georgie’s mother “a Magdalene for her Christ,” “on her knees for the higher power. The Church craves power above all things, power above all of the living,” “Your mother, my mother. . .” (252). Maureen blames the Church-encouraged gender labelling, based on patriarchal standards, for Irish women’s misery: “The mummies. The bitches. The wives. The girlfriends. The whores. Women are all for it too, so long as they fall into the right class. They all look down on the whores. There but for the grace of God” (251). Georgie and Maureen, both ostracized and fated, establish a close bond with each other. Ms Phelan takes care of Georgie in a non-judgemental way that she has never experienced from her own parents.

As a guardian angel, Maureen prevents the suicide of motherless Ryan Cusack, another petty criminal in *The Glorious Heresies*, the small-scale dealer, who has been regularly beaten by his father for years. She makes a clear diagnosis: “A little gangster. Isn’t that all you are? Don’t you think how you make your money has plenty to do with wanting to drown yourself?” (370). She is the only person who sees Ryan’s waking conscience:

“Of course this place can pull you apart,” she said. “But this country’s done punishing me, and I can do what I like now, and so I choose to fix you, Ryan Cusack, and by God this pile will let me. . . . Whatever’s bad we’ll burn it out.” (371)

To some extent, Ms Phelan believes that saving these “damned souls” could help her to save her own. Her religion is people and its practice in action not sermons. Maureen expresses her disappointment with the condemnatory Irish society: “*And shame on you, Ireland. . . . four full decades later. You think you’d at least look after your own?*” (363, emphasis original).

In *The Blood Miracles*, Maureen unceasingly continues to protect the life and save the soul of Ryan Cusack. The second novel begins with Ryan’s expanding his criminal activity into cooperating with Italian

mobsters. As the narrator comments: "Ryan failed and failed gloriously" (McInerney, *TBM* 20). Referring to Maureen, Ryan declares: "she thinks she's befriended a tough bastard and, coincidentally, has some wicked task too big a sin for one set of hands" (103). Ms Phelan wants to rescue Ryan through the last untainted things in his life: music and the memory of his dead mother. When Ryan contemplates committing suicide by jumping into the river, Maureen appeals to the authority of a maternal figure: "Great times we're having, when you meet young fellas making eyes at the Lee in the early hours. . . What would your mother say?" (28). She invites him to stay at her daughter-in-law house where his mother's piano was sold and she asks him to play. Ryan admits: "'I'm wound up,' . . . 'It's a big thing, playing that piano again'" (114). Maureen is capable of seeing in Ryan the very same motherless void that she saw in children of the exported generation. Reminding Ryan of what his life was before he lost his mother awakens in him some sort of need for belonging. "It might be, Ryan thinks, that his getting reacquainted with his piano has fed a hunger in him. For a week or so after giving Maureen her recital his place in his city seems to make more sense" (115). Like Georgie and Robbie, Ryan becomes one more adopted son of Mother Ireland—Maureen—and she makes him feel accepted:

. . . he gets fond of Maureen's couch and her grumbling and it makes him feel better to have someone so alien to talk to. . . They tell each other stories. His are of girls in whose labyrinthine affections he's fond of getting lost. Hers are of old Catholic Ireland, Magdalene laundries, the tyranny of faith. It comes apparent to him why they get along so well. Something barely mended about Maureen. That raggedness qualifies her to recognise his gawping into the pit, gave her the strength to haul him out again. (150–51)

When Ryan finds it hard to be released from his criminal obligations, Maureen asks her son Jimmy to help the boy to get a fresh start. Moreover, Ms Phelan is the one who encourages Ryan to act decently when his beloved Karin gets pregnant, reminding him how important it is to do the right thing at the right time: "I've been abandoned and robbed and exiled and all at the same time and if that didn't crush me, Ryan, back in the days when an Irish woman couldn't go for a piss without the say-so of the Catholic church, then this won't crush you. D'you think I don't understand evil?" (261). Maureen can bring out the best in her protégé: she is aware that Cusack's "fear is selfish in the most noble sense. He has given himself over to something tiny yet bigger than himself; she reads the primitive shapes of this devotion, she puts the notes right in his head" (261).

Although times have changed, the attitude towards unmarried mothers in Ireland still remains to some extent biased. “They have been castigated, punished, stigmatised, ignored, labelled and controlled” (Leane and Kiely 296). Contemporarily, this prejudice is not based solely on the grounds of the Catholic religion but also on economics: unmarried women with children are perceived as emblematic social security recipients, irresponsible or helpless individuals relying too much on the state support, “of weak moral character,” with “a higher than average risk of poverty” (Leane and Kiely 297, 301–03).

Against the bleak background of desolate council flats and shabby working-class Cork districts, Maureen Phelan constitutes an embracing, non-judgemental Mother Ireland for all “children” who need her maternal acceptance: former prostitutes, misfits, miscreants and crooks. Like many Irish mothers forced to give their own “illegitimate” birth children away, Maureen feels anger, but unlike them, she seeks not only justice but also revenge. The studies conducted by researchers prove that Irish women who, like Maureen, gave birth in the 1950s and the 1960s experienced the “process of moving from confusion and dismay to anger” (Hilliard 150) with regard to the Church’s attitude towards female sexuality and motherhood, especially the one regarded at that time as “illegitimate.” In Ms Phelan’s case, this crusade assumes the form of burning the symbolic institutional establishments that she holds responsible for her misery. She refuses to be further victimized even if that requires a murder in her own self-defence. As a “right rogue,” Maureen is irreverent about the Catholic church’s position in Ireland, unapologetic, and insubordinate to social and religious constraints to the point of breaking the law.

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