



The Lost Girls: Teenage Pregnancy in Contemporary Irish Fiction and Film

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the in-between state of young female protagonists in three contemporary Irish texts: Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper* (1990), Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* (1993) and Peter Mullan's 2002 film, *The Magdalene Sisters*. All three texts introduce young girls who, faced with unwanted pregnancies, have to make decisions about having children—or, more often, choices are forced upon them—despite the fact that they are still largely considered children themselves. Their situations gesture toward the fact that young girls in Ireland have not yet been afforded the level of citizenship to which they are entitled. During their pregnancies, the circumstances of which are often hushed and denied, they lack social and political power. Thus, not only are the girls lost between the categories of child and woman, but their agency is lost because of the precarious positions they hold. Their inability to demonstrate their rights of citizenship represents Ireland's failure to "cherish the children of the nation equally"—a fundamental goal of its original Proclamation as a Republic.

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Chapter One

Introduction

In Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* young Henry Smart claims that, like his mother before him—who had had three children and several miscarriages by the time she reached her early twenties—he never really was a child: there are no children in the tenement slums of early twentieth-century Dublin. Describing his mother's years as a newlywed, Henry claims that "she was a child of the Dublin slums, no proper child at all" (5). Later, when he is presented with a draft of the Proclamation of the Republic, Henry's response elaborates on his early denial of proper childhood: addressing his own pain and the "pain of a million others" he insists that "there should be something in [the Proclamation] about the rights of children" (97). Although he is hesitant to grant much credence to the social constructions of what childhood should be, Henry recognizes that children need and deserve a certain degree of special treatment and care. When he later hears Pearse reading the Proclamation during the Easter Rising—it is quoted in the novel exactly as the real-life Pádraig Pearse would have read it—Henry swells with pride at the textual addition that resulted from his recommendation: "The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty [...] and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and all its parts, *cherishing all the children of the nation equally [...]*" (96, my emphasis).

Henry's ambivalence toward the concept of childhood is a cogent point of departure in studying teenage pregnancy in the contemporary Irish texts I have chosen to

examine: Roddy Doyle's 1990 novel *The Snapper*, Edna O'Brien's 1993 novel *Down by the River* and Peter Mullan's 2002 film *The Magdalene Sisters*. While *A Star Called Henry* is set at the beginning of the twentieth century—when the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence brought with them the dawn of Irish nationhood—my three primary texts also situate themselves in significant moments of Irish political history: *The Snapper* is set in 1990's Dublin, right before the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger; the events of *Down by the River* transpire in rural 1990's Ireland, in the heat of the abortion debate ignited by the X case;¹ and *The Magdalene Sisters*, set in the early 1960's, takes place during the years in which Ireland struggled with economic isolation as a result of its separation from Britain. Two of the texts are fictional renderings of actual historical events in recent Irish history: *Down by the River* is a fictionalized account of the 1992 X case, and *The Magdalene Sisters* retells the stories of some of the women who were incarcerated in the Magdalene asylums run by the Catholic Church in the twentieth century. As these texts transform fact into fiction, the characters within them often come alive as much as the real-life histories the selections attempt to fictionalize. For this reason, it sometimes seems as if my analysis of the texts slides between fiction and the reality represented. However, it must be emphasized that in their fluid representations of real-life events, the texts demand such flexibility in analysis.

The three texts studied here prominently feature young girls who, faced with unwanted pregnancies, are forced to make choices about having children—or, more often,

¹In 1992, Irish courts placed an injunction on a 14-year-old rape victim in order to prevent her from travelling to England to have an abortion.

choices are forced upon them—despite the fact that they are still largely considered children themselves. In a reflection of Henry Smart's uncertainty towards childhood, the girls in the texts studied here all hold precarious positions not only because of their patriarchal society, but also because they are physically mature enough to reproduce though not emotionally mature enough to handle the repercussions of this physical maturation. In their ever-changing states, they are forced to face the dangers of not fitting in anywhere. They are lost in between the categories of child and woman. They are forced to face the dangers of not fitting in anywhere. Further, any agency to which they might be entitled is lost because of the ambiguous positions that they hold. As a result, they have absolutely no social or political power, and are unable to speak up against their attackers.

While international conventions demonstrate that there are arbitrary age distinctions between children and adults,² for the purposes of this dissertation I use the theories of childhood posited by political philosopher Marc Jans, who views the distinction between child and adult as fluid and ambiguous (34). Other child scholars agree that childhood, as well as its definition, is impossible to fully understand or represent: in his 2009 editorial of *Childhood* entitled "When a child is not a child, and other conceptual hazards of childhood studies," Daniel Thomas Cook writes that he finds a "tension, and perhaps a contradiction" between "identifying [...] multiple, malleable and differentiated childhoods from a position which must in some reject or relativize at least

² The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989 and subsequently ratified by every nation in the world except the United States and Somalia, states that a person is considered a child if he or she is under the age of 18 (UNICEF).

one perspective on childhood" (9). If I were not bound by the limits of a Master's thesis, I would engage in a more sustained manner with these contradictions. I would also attempt to demonstrate how the ambiguous positions of girls in these contemporary works fix the selections as important representations, and active parts, of a changing Irish society. However, since the study of childhood is on constantly shifting terrain, in the texts studied here I examine instances where characters are treated like and regarded as children, regardless of age. The young girls studied tend not to fit the standard definitions, or (as in the case of *The Snapper*'s Sharon Rabbitte) the arbitrary measures, of childhood.

At such precarious points of maturation, the girls within the texts studied here do not know how to handle their pregnancies. Families are equally unsure. However, the mechanisms of Church and state have definitive responses to teenage pregnancy and those limits present further difficulties for the female protagonists. Kathryn Conrad attempts to explain uncertainty towards unintended pregnancy in her article "Fetal Ireland: National Bodies and Political Agency." She claims that in Ireland, unplanned pregnancies become a "public spectacle [...] a screen onto which the anxieties of others are projected" (166). Teenage pregnancy causes such anxiety because it typically occurs by accident; and yet, the tension is further exacerbated because of the girls' ambiguous status as part-child, part-woman. As a result, circumstances around the pregnancies, including the incidents of sexual assault that often caused the pregnancies to begin with, are hushed, repressed and covered up. The politics of this denial raise interesting questions about what is at stake for young mothers in contemporary Ireland: what rights

do these characters have in a country whose laws are firmly anti-abortion?³ What agency can pregnant child characters have in determining the course of their own lives? What do textual situations that deny young women the freedom of choice say about a nation that underlined the importance of cherishing its children in its original Proclamation as a Republic?

In Roddy Doyle's novel *The Snapper*,⁴ young Sharon Rabbitt becomes pregnant as the result of a drunken encounter with her father's best friend in the parking lot of the local bar; she stops to say hello, and Mr. Burgess takes advantage of her highly inebriated state by proceeding to have sex with her before she has time to realize what is happening. When she breaks the news but refuses to reveal the identity of the father, her parents accept the situation and agree that they will help her raise the child, but rumours begin to fly as she becomes the object of scorn in her neighbourhood for having conceived an "illegitimate" child. The confused behaviour of her family and friends, which works in tandem with humour to elide serious issues, suggests an anxiety towards Sharon's in-between state, which is connected to Sharon's own disquietude. Since all these ambivalent behaviours and unsettling absences occur in a novel primarily about the precarious position of Sharon, they become automatically connected to her in-between state. Chapter Two of this thesis will examine how Sharon's predicament demonstrates

³ Currently, abortion is neither constitutionally nor legally prohibited in Ireland. However, the constitutional position and interpretations of the legal position governing abortion in Ireland have been, and continue to be, firmly anti-abortion.

⁴ This dissertation will focus primarily on the fictional text *The Snapper*, but will make occasional mention of the 1993 film of the same name. However, differentiation between the versions of the story will always be made explicit.

that current theories of child citizenship cannot necessarily provide an appropriate mode of action to ensure the needs of children having children are adequately met.

In *Down by the River*, Edna O'Brien adapts the facts of the 1992 X case into the fictional story of 14-year-old Mary MacNamara, who is raped and impregnated by her widowed father. In a feverish attempt to escape the fate that awaits her in a country whose laws are strictly anti-abortion, Mary tries to drown herself in a river near her home but is rescued by a neighbour. After Mary explains her predicament—carefully leaving out the identity of her rapist—the neighbour arranges for them to travel to England so that Mary can have a legal abortion. When they are presented with a court injunction, however, Mary is pressured to return to Ireland, where she becomes the focal point of a nationwide debate about her situation. Surrounded by people who want to control her rather than to help her—both pro-life and pro-choice factions exploit her situation in the hopes of achieving their own ends, instead of giving her the love she needs as a child—her anxiety grows as time continues to run out. Finally, at the end of the novel, she miscarries and nature “solves” her problem for her. The failure of the novel’s characters to provide Mary with the appropriate duty of care causes her to fail in negotiating the terms of her own pregnancy and thus leads to an important examination of children’s citizenship in Ireland today. The adaptation of the X case into fiction demonstrates that girls in Ireland deserve to actively assert their own citizenship and participate in making important decisions about their lives. Chapter Three argues that O'Brien uses the empathy involved in adaptation to forward and demand change in the arena of children's rights in Ireland.

The Magdalene Sisters tells the story of four young Irish women incarcerated in one of the Magdalene asylums established by the Catholic nuns of the Order of the Sisters of Mercy in the 1880's. Instituted to provide places where prostitutes might redeem themselves through penitence and hard work—doing laundry for the profit of the institution but usually for no personal pay—the function of the asylums was extended to redeem young women and girls who had become pregnant outside of marriage or had reported being the victims of rape. Often, these young women were deemed “too pretty” or flirtatious, or had behaved in a way “thought to be offensive to the sensibilities of right-thinking, God-fearing Irish men and women” (McKiernan 29). Set in the outskirts of Dublin from 1964-1968, *The Magdalene Sisters* is a fictionalized rendering of survivor testimony revealed in Steve Humphries's 1998 documentary, *Sex in a Cold Climate*, and thus depicts a very real experience for the more than 30,000 women that have been held in Magdalene asylums (McKiernan 29). Survivors have attested that they were the victims of “ritual humiliation, corporal and mental punishment and a brutal regime of discipline bordering on terror” within the laundries (McKiernan 29). Remarkably, says McKiernan, the last laundry did not close until 1996—“2 years after apartheid was formally dismantled in South Africa” (29). James Smith notes that the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge officially announced that the institution was closing because the laundries were “no longer commercially viable” (“*The Magdalene Sisters*” 153).

Though the characters in *The Magdalene Sisters* represent confections of evidence from different institutions and eras, by inventing a meeting of the four girls at the same asylum in 1964, Mullan is faithful to history but brings what could be the story of any

Magdalene victim into wide popular circulation. The characters—Rose (who bears a child outside of marriage), Margaret (who reports that she has been raped by a cousin), Crispina (who is mentally unstable and also bears a child at a young age) and Bernadette (an orphaned schoolgirl thought to be too fond of flirting)—work together to demonstrate Mullan's fictional account of historic injustice. Whereas choices are forced upon these characters at the beginning of the film, by the end all four young girls fight back against the religious authorities that have imprisoned and abused them. However, individual agency falls back upon itself, and freedom for the girls is only achieved when they work together. Chapter Four argues that the failure of the characters' individual acts demonstrates that agency for the Magdalene girls and young girls in Ireland in general needs to be collective in order to achieve a future significantly different from the past.

1.1 Scholarly significance

The Snapper (1990), *Down by the River* (1993), and *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) have inspired much scholarly attention, but they are also recent enough that there is still space for new discussion. Studies of my primary texts have focused on religion (Brereton 2008), incest (St. Peter 2000), identity (Lindahl-Raittila 2006), forced labour (James 2003), community (McKiernan 2008), and mother-daughter relationships (Ingman 2007). While Linden Peach (2004) and Mary McGlynn (2005) have both addressed the issue of motherhood in the works of Roddy Doyle, and Sophia Hillan (2006) has addressed the abortion debate in Edna O'Brien's 1990's trilogy, no one has yet explored the issue of

children having children in said texts. In fact, very little scholarly work has been published about children's rights in any work of contemporary Irish fiction. In the introduction to a 2009 special edition of *Éire-Ireland*, editors Maria Luddy and James M. Smith note that even though the last twenty-five years have "witnessed a series of social, political, and sexual controversies with children at their very center" as well as a pattern of cultural production that has been dominated by representations of Irish childhood, the study of Irish children and childhood is a still-nascent field of inquiry (5-6).

More particularly, very little scholarly attention has been paid to teenage pregnancy and the agency and rights of young mothers in contemporary Irish literature. Philip Tew (1999) and Patrick Crotty (2005) have both written on children, and Jane Elizabeth Dougherty (2007) and Kelly J.S. McGovern (2009) have written important articles on the disconnection between girl and woman within Irish literary girlhood, but as of yet there has been no sustained scholarly engagement of the way teenage pregnancy has been represented in Irish cultural production. This gap in the scholarship is notable, considering the extent to which child pregnancy occurs in Irish fiction and film in the latter part of the twentieth century—a period rife with issues regarding the abuse of young mothers and child pregnancy.⁵ The 1992 X case and the 1996 closing of the last Magdalene laundry in Dublin were particularly sensational events that respectively stirred public demonstrations and garnered enormous media attention in the nation's capital. In light of such events, the time is ripe for scholarly research in the arena of children's rights. Further, there is ample space—indeed, a demonstrated need—to investigate the

⁵ In addition to the texts studied here, there have been several others that have dealt with this topic, including Margo Harkin's 1990 film *Hush-a-Bye Baby* and Maeve Binchy's "Shepherd's Bush" (178).

way such issues are dealt with in contemporary Irish narratives. There is an abundance of room to investigate and analyze the rights of girls who, not quite children and not quite adults, hold a unique position. This thesis attempts to enter that room of inquiry, albeit with a necessarily limited scope.

Jane Elizabeth Dougherty cites the work of Lady Gregory, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Nuala O'Faolain to demonstrate the "inaccessibility" of the Irish girlhood experience (59). In the context of a national literature that demonstrates no shortage of novels depicting Irish boyhood, she claims there is a "disconnection" between girl and woman that is a "hallmark of the Irish literary girlhood" (52). However, the texts I will explore in the following chapters suggest that there is no longer such a strong binary between "girl" and "woman" in Irish cultural production. The boundaries between these categories have become blurred within texts that focus on children who are having children themselves. Whereas Dougherty and McGovern argue that Irish girlhood remains unwritten, I argue that the ambiguous stage between girl and woman in Irish fiction and film is in need of scholarly attention.

1.2 Theoretical framework: Children having children

To date, there has been no extended scholarly engagement of the rights of Irish girls who hold the precarious position of part-child, part-adult. As Luddy and Smith suggest, the study of children and childhood is only beginning in Ireland, though in other countries considerable scholarship already exists in these fields (6). Fortunately, there

has been wide-ranging analysis of Irish women's rights, which has proven useful in my research (Conrad 2001; Ingman 2007; St. Peter 2007). Because the characters I have chosen to study do not fit neatly into either category of child or woman, I will use theories of both children's rights and women's rights.

For the purposes of this dissertation, childhood will be defined by drawing upon sociologist Marc Jans's theoretical reading of childhood as a symbolic construction. In "Children as Citizens: Towards a Contemporary Notion of Childhood Participation," Jans concludes that childhood itself is a phenomenon that has been socially constructed in the last several centuries; prior to this, children were considered different from adults only in that they occupied the period of human growth at which development occurs most rapidly. In the past 350 years, however, scholars began to discuss childhood as a specific stage of life and childhood as a social construction has been taken apart and reconstructed in a variety of ways (Jans 32). Currently, international debates about children's rights primarily focus upon the societal participation of children as rights-bearing citizens (Jans 27). Jans writes that today, the childhood years present an ambivalent reality because children are surrounded with care and protection but are simultaneously motivated to assert themselves as autonomous individuals (27). Despite their dependency and need for protection, Jans claims that children must be able to have *some* control over the decisions made about their own lives (40-41).

The scholarship of women's rights in Ireland is much more developed than theories of child citizenship.⁶ Theorists agree that the lack of reproductive justice for women in Ireland shows that the nation has not yet permitted women the agency to which they are entitled (Conrad 160; Hackett 111). Irish abortion laws are among the strictest in Europe (Side 34).⁷ By denying women the freedom of reproductive choice, Ireland demonstrates that it does not permit full rights of citizenship to females. Claire Hackett demands these rights be made real: "the right and ability to make real choices about [their] lives: [their] fertility, [their] sexuality, childcare, the means to be independent and all the areas in which [they] are currently denied autonomy and dignity" (111). Unfortunately, Ireland's failure to permit full rights of citizenship to women shows that there is a vast distance to be covered before any notion of citizenship is granted to pregnant girls who have not even reached the full status of "woman."

Still, the emergence of childhood studies in the Irish context is one step toward the achievement of this goal. In the following chapters, I will show how contemporary Irish fiction and film reflect the need for further exploration and engagement of the topic of rights and citizenship for children who have children in Ireland. Taken together, the texts offer an imagined approach to child citizenship, but such imagined possibilities are precarious at best. These narratives, which promote child citizenship, are like Jans's theory in that they can only go so far in promoting empathy for children and ensuring that

⁶ In addition to the work of Kathryn Conrad, numerous scholars have recently contributed to the discourse of women's rights in Ireland, including Yvonne Galligan (*Women and Politics in Contemporary Ireland: From the Margins to the Mainstream*); Lisa Smyth (*Abortion and Nation: The Politics of Reproduction in Contemporary Ireland*); Jennifer Schweppe (*The Unborn Child, Article 40.3.3 and Abortion in Ireland: 25 Years of Protection?*); and Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Vallulis (*Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*).

⁷ Poland, Malta, and Andorra have similar restrictions on abortion (Side 34).

children's rights (whatever they may be) are respected. Ultimately, change can only be created in the world outside theories and fictive texts.

Chapter Two

The In-Between Position of Sharon Rabbitte: Anxiety and Ambivalence in *The Snapper*

In his article "Roddy Doyle: From Barrytown to the GPO," Brian Donnelly suggests that the lack of explicit drama related to Sharon's pregnancy is a sign of the progressive spirit of 1990's Ireland (20-21). According to Donnelly, her family's pragmatic response is indicative of Ireland's move toward secularization (20-21). Indeed, the Rabbitte family—which appears in all Doyle's first three books—is not overly religious, and when Sharon becomes pregnant, her parents are more concerned with identifying the father and maintaining social reputations than with the fact that her pregnancy will not be sanctioned by the church. But because "saving face" is essential for both Sharon and her parents,⁸ some critics question the degree to which the novel demonstrates social progress. Although the characters are not concerned with how the church will feel about Sharon's pregnancy, they are certainly worried about the opinions of their friends and neighbours, which suggests that religious sanctions on pregnancy outside of marriage have trickled down and become embedded in social values. Michael Cronin writes that Doyle's work anticipates the liberalization of Ireland in the 1990's but it also shows that the "emergence of more enlightened approaches to moral and social issues" cannot be taken for granted (44). In the chapter to follow, I will examine the critical reception of *The Snapper*, which underlines the novel's simultaneous acceptance and mistrust of the modern spirit of "New Ireland." Then, I will interrogate the way that

⁸ Embarrassed, Sharon refuses to reveal the father's identity, and Jimmy constantly agonizes over the way his daughter has affected his social relations at the pub.

the opposing spirits of progression and regression are linked to Sharon's child-state in the novel. This analysis will lead into the main argument of the chapter: the ambivalent and sometimes confused behaviour of the characters in *The Snapper* suggests an anxiety towards Sharon's in-between state at the onset of her pregnancy, as well as towards the precarious status of children who have children in contemporary Ireland.

Literary critic Dermot McCarthy uses the characters of Bimbo (Jimmy's best friend) and Veronica (Sharon's mother) to show Ireland's reluctance to adopt liberal attitudes towards pregnancy outside of marriage simply because they are "suddenly convenient" (62). Though both characters are supportive of Sharon, they certainly question the "new ways" represented by her actions. First, when Bimbo hears about Sharon's pregnancy at the local pub, he asks Jimmy whether she will get married as a result of her condition. Jimmy's response underlines his awareness that he is living in changing times: "No [...] Why should she? They've more cop-on these days. Would you get married if you were tha' age again these days?" (Doyle 203). But Bimbo claims that, despite contemporary liberal attitudes toward pregnancy, if he found himself in Sharon's position he actually "probably would" get married (203). Veronica is likewise hesitant to adopt any new social stance: alone one day with her husband, she asks him whether he thinks they should tell their younger children that "what Sharon did was wrong" (189). Again, Jimmy tries to show that he is a man of modern views, responding that "Times've changed, Veronica" (189). Veronica is steadfast and quickly counters, "But do we have to keep up with them?" (189). McCarthy hints that such determination to hold onto social ideals demonstrates that times really have not changed as much as Jimmy seems to think.

Similarly, Cronin writes that *The Snapper* is therefore “neither naïve nor wishful in assuming that social change is a painless process” (50). The difficulties presented by this process are reflected in the tension demonstrated by characters who must choose between the “old ways” and the new.

Despite the novel's tension, though, humour plays a large role in *The Snapper*, which leads McGlynn to conclude that the text has a dark underbelly. She claims that, through humour, *The Snapper* glosses over the more serious issues presented (“Pregnancy, Privacy, and Domesticity” 151). Overall, the novel's humour has been both celebrated and criticized: White characterizes Sharon as a comic heroine (64) and Gerry Smyth calls the novel's humour its “feel-good factor” (73), but Dermot McCarthy, Michael Cronin and Linden Peach all agree with McGlynn that there are sombre undertones hiding beneath comic appearances in the novel and its adaptation into film. McCarthy writes that the absence of a moral perspective in the novel overshadows the story and “fracture[s] its comic patina” (59); Cronin wonders whether such a serious topic as teenage pregnancy resulting from sexual assault can “lend itself to comic treatment without raising questions about the ethical nature of the enterprise” (44); and Peach points to the way nationalist and religious discourses have partnered with economic factors to work against women's rights in Ireland, denying women access to birth control and abortion (“Mater Dolorosa” 153). Written at a time when these issues were gaining prominence, Peach claims that “the novel treats Sharon's situation and decision to have the child somewhat lightly” (“Mater Dolorosa” 153). Thus, although some critics have

taken Doyle's use of humour at face value, most have read it as a technique that either incites or elides analysis of the deeper issues being signalled by it.

McGlynn examines the way that Sharon herself uses humour in the novel, making light of her situation and muting her sense of violation by concocting a story about a Spanish sailor to deflect suspicion from Burgess, because affairs in Barrytown are never secret or private (*Narratives of Class* 106). Sharon's refusal to name her attacker is a common reaction to rape,⁹ but Barrytown's overall tendency to deflect, repress and deny suggests that there is a deeper significance to Sharon's cover-up. For her to make her issue a serious one by identifying the father would cultivate more questions than the ones already being asked in Barrytown, bringing additional attention to circumstances that already have people talking. Sharon wants to avoid the awkward and painful feelings that arise when she thinks and talks about these circumstances, and so she uses humour to distort them. But McGlynn argues that the "jocularity" of the Hikers' pub where Sharon tells her story is "forced" (*Narratives of Class* 108). White offers a contrasting perspective, claiming that the novel's humour does not deny truth but rather offers a way of dealing with it (77); however, the lack of explicit acknowledgement of the existence of sexual assault in the novel leads me to think otherwise. In a community where there is almost no such thing as the private sphere, relationships are indeed acted out according to accepted public behaviours. As McGlynn writes, the novel thus becomes "a critique of an Irish society grounded in familiarity without intimacy" ("Pregnancy, Privacy, and Domesticity" 150). Because the humorous nature of interactions in Sharon's family is

⁹ According to the Rape Crisis Network of Ireland, less than twenty percent of rape victims actually report the assault to authorities (9).

not that different from the lively banter between her and her friends at the Hikers' pub, credence is given to McGlynn's argument for a collective Barrytown identity that has no room for privacy.

The dark underbelly of humour and the performance of accepted public behaviours in *The Snapper* are linked to the way prescribed gender roles are perpetuated by the novel. Burgess's belief in power differentials between men and women is brutally manifested through his sexual assault of Sharon. But critics have noted other, more subtle behaviours that underline Burgess's belief that men and women should behave according to their gender. His conviction that women should demonstrate physical and sexual subservience—as shown through his assault of Sharon—is extended such that he believes women should show verbal subservience as well. When Sharon confronts Burgess at his house, taking him to task about the rumours he has been spreading about her—"You said I was a ride. Didn't yeh? [...] You got your hole, didn't yeh?"—Burgess reddens and "snap[s] his eyes shut" because "he hate[s] hearing women using the language he use[s]" (Doyle 223). Cronin notes that when Burgess flinches at Sharon's words the double standard he has created for men and women reveals the "dangerous duplicity of [Barrytown's] moral majority" (50). In a novel that, on the surface, seems to demonstrate the liberal attitude of "New Ireland," such gender stereotyping keeps any progressiveness at bay.

Gender stereotypes in the novel are also perpetuated through the special attention given to male characters, despite the fact that they are not central to the story. Doyle openly admits that although Sharon is the novel's main character, a preoccupation with

Jimmy gradually overtook him throughout the writing process (White 154). The result has been that many critics read the novel less as a story of the sexual assault and pregnancy of a young girl than as a depiction of the "conflict between a daughter about to create a new life and a father who increasingly feels marginalized both at home and among his mates" (Donnelly 21). McGlynn insists that Doyle's focus on Jimmy "eclipse[s]" the circumstances of Sharon's unwanted pregnancy and her willingness to take charge of it (*Narratives of Class* 99). In shifting attention to a male character, Doyle does injustice to Sharon as well as to the questions related to women's rights raised by both her sexual violation and the resulting pregnancy.

Roddy Doyle has himself acknowledged the ethical issues raised by Burgess's violation of Sharon. In a 1996 interview, he claimed that his intention in writing *The Snapper* was to leave the circumstances of the protagonist's sexual assault open to interpretation:

When I was writing the book, I didn't want to encroach too much. I wanted it to be left up to the reader. Legally, in Ireland, it is not a rape, although I believe in some states in the States [sic] it is a rape. I wouldn't personally consider it a rape. I do believe that [George Burgess] behaved very wrongly in taking advantage of a drunk woman. But, again, does that make it illegal? Where do you step from immorality to illegality? I wanted the circumstances from her memory to be really seedy and awful with this yawning big hole of embarrassment [...] I suspect that this is not the first time she has had sex against the car [sic] when she has been drunk. (White 150-151)

Gerry Smyth lauds Doyle's ability to "open meaning up rather than close it down" by allowing the reader to come to his or her own conclusions about Sharon's experience in *The Snapper*; having the reader become part of the meaning-making process "refuses the

notion of a single vision of modern Irish society" and contributes to an understanding of Ireland as a community in flux—"a conclave of voices and visions" (67). But McGlynn reads a danger in "ceding control of the text to the multiplicity of voices in Barrytown," most of which are humorous and thus gloss over the serious issues presented by the novel ("Pregnancy, Privacy, and Domesticity" 155-156). Overall, reviewers of both the novel and the film have either neglected to broach the issue of consent or pointed to Sharon's culpability. McGlynn is shocked at the number of movie reviews that detracted from the issue of rape by citing Sharon's drunkenness and perceived availability, deeming her actions a "mistake" and a "seduction" (*Narratives of Class* 107). McGlynn suggests that interpretations of the novel that claim Sharon has *not* been raped threaten to undo recent work in the arena of women's rights in Ireland.¹⁰

Several critics have also noted that the possibility of abortion is almost completely absent from the text. When Jimmy asks Sharon if she will "keep" the baby, her response is, "There's no way I'd have an abortion [...] Abortion's murder" (Doyle 150). Her parents' responses express their approval of her choice: "'You're right' [...] 'It is o' course'" (150). White notes that this attitude is peculiar, considering that Sharon's family exhibits no signs of being religious and Sharon herself is not educated enough to

¹⁰ Doyle's description of the assault denotes a lack of consent on Sharon's part: "[...] they were kissing rough—she wasn't really: her mouth was just open" (185). The consent question is made clearer in the film version of *The Swapper*, where there is a distinct, albeit quiet, "no" from Sharon once it registers in her drunken semi-consciousness that Burgess has begun to have sex with her. The rape scene is then juxtaposed with shots of Sharon weeping alone in her bedroom afterwards. In addition to this, when she looks back upon her assault in the novel, Sharon feels like getting sick (Doyle 255); all she can think about is how "when [Burgess] sat down white skin poked out from between the buttons of his shirt" (185). She later tells Burgess that she "hate[s] the fuckin' sight of [him]" (262) and when her friend Yvonne (Burgess's daughter) asks who Sharon is having the baby for, her first thought is "Your fat da" (193). In light of these thoughts and feelings, it becomes inconceivable that Sharon would have consented to sex with Burgess had she been sober.

understand the biological implications of the abortion procedure (81). Further, Peach points out that in light of changing attitudes in Dublin in the 1990's, the choice of abortion would not have been difficult to argue from a social point of view, given "the facts of the rape, [Sharon's] age and her economic circumstances" ("Mater Dolorosa" 153).¹¹ The circumvention of the abortion issue brings me back to the widely held belief that perhaps Irish society is not "progressing" as quickly as some would like to think.

2.1 Sharon: Child or adult?

The paradox in the novel that simultaneously suggests progression and regression is related to Sharon's in-between state at the onset of her pregnancy: she is neither an innocent little girl nor has she fully entered adulthood. But what does make Sharon's sexual assault and consequent pregnancy particularly ripe for analysis is that, despite the book's disclosure that Sharon is twenty years old, she is still in many ways very much a child. Up to now, some critics have acknowledged this child-status of Sharon's,¹² though

¹¹ It is important to note that abortion would not have been viable for Sharon from a legal point of view. In *Abortion and Nation: The Politics of Reproduction in Contemporary Ireland*, Lisa Smyth provides a detailed history of the abortion debate in Ireland. In 1983, a conservative alliance called the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign initiated a public referendum to address abortion in Ireland's *Constitution* (Smyth). Amendment 8 was approved in the referendum by a 66 percent majority vote. As a result, Article 40.3.3, which recognized the right to life of the unborn, was inserted into the *Constitution* on 7 October 1983 and promulgated as law. However, Ireland's firm anti-abortion stance has not stopped the 138,000 women who have travelled abroad to undergo the procedure since 1980 (Traynor, "Women Challenge Irish Abortion Ban").

¹² McGlynn sees *The Snapper* as largely belonging in the genre of family stories that present "romance between a child and a parent substitute" ("Pregnancy, Privacy, and Domesticity" 143); Peach compares Sharon to 14-year-old Ms. X of the 1992 X case ("Mater Dolorosa" 153); both Cronin and White read the novel as a bildungsroman depicting Sharon's journey from childhood to adulthood through pregnancy (Cronin 57-58; White 68).

no one has yet analyzed it in terms of her sexual assault and the way her rights as a child interweave with her rights as a woman.

Although in the aforementioned interview Doyle claims that he suspects the episode with Burgess “is not the first time [Sharon] has had sex against the car [sic] when she has been drunk”—which would signal many critics to argue that she has already entered adulthood—Sharon’s emotional maturity has yet to catch up with her physically (White 151). George Burgess tellingly refers to Sharon’s child-status himself: in the scene where she confronts him in his front room, he offers her money, telling her to buy “sweets” with it but quickly correcting himself to say “drinks” (Doyle 227). McGlynn points out that Sharon never contemplates raising the child without her family, which is “sweet, but also telling as to the degree of her dependency” (*Narratives of Class* 111). It is both notable and paradoxical that Sharon is “adult” enough to come to a conclusion about her own lack of adulthood. Clearly, she is not yet mature enough to raise a child on her own, away from her family.¹³

White and McCarthy take opposing sides in examining Sharon’s choice to remain at home—White claims that her careful way of ordering her actions shows “savvy” (65) while McCarthy sees this as manipulative and calculating (75)—but because both explore this behaviour as if Sharon has already entered adulthood they miss the nuances that point to her status as a young girl in an in-between state. McCarthy writes that when Sharon

¹³ Cronin argues that the film version of *The Snapper* reinforces Sharon’s “child” status in the family home by the sheer number of scenes shot in the bedroom she shares with her two younger sisters, on the door of which there is a sign that the camera is careful to include in several shots: it reads, “Caution Children” (Cronin 58). The shared bedroom, writes Cronin, shows that in a sense Sharon also “shares the lingering world of childhood that [her sisters] inhabit” (Cronin 58).

threatens to leave home to "bring the curtain down" on Jimmy's impersonation of a father "wounded" by the immoral actions of his daughter, the "charade within a charade only points up the empty moral bank balances of both characters" (76). But to weigh Jimmy against Sharon in this manner is to compare apples and oranges. Jimmy is the middle-aged father upon whose status and life-experience Sharon is still economically dependent. Conversely, Sharon, who is twenty and still living at home, gives no indication that she has ever had a healthy romantic relationship; rather, she is still exploring her own definition of what is indeed "moral." McCarthy calls the pregnant Sharon "aggressive" and narcissistic, denouncing her predilection for drunken escapades at the *Hikers*, but Sharon's destructive actions underscore her immaturity more than her immorality (79). And for all the ethical opinions Jimmy and Veronica give Sharon about her behaviour, it is telling that no one tries to stop her from going to the pub; maybe Veronica herself did the same thing while pregnant with her own children, and she still might not realize the dangers alcohol can pose to an unborn child. The possibility that such a lack of awareness might exist within the *Rabbitte* family does not condone Sharon's actions—it could be argued that since she is physically old enough to reproduce, she should be emotionally mature enough to face her responsibilities—but it does expose these actions in a new light. At times, Sharon's manner of conduct demonstrates an assertive self-awareness, such as her confrontation of George Burgess, but other instances undoubtedly highlight her need for guidance.

The fact that both Sharon (a child) and Jimmy (an adult) demonstrate a degree of development in the novel shows that maturation is not necessarily a final destination that

differentiates childhood from adulthood, but that it is rather a dynamic and continuous process for both children and adults. But while children and adults share this tendency to grow interdependently and as autonomous individuals, it is obvious that children need extra love, nurturing and guidance. Despite the agency we must afford children, it is still up to adults to make many meaningful decisions that influence children's lives. Marc Jans recognizes this social ambiguity as the "ambivalence of current childhood" and concludes that scholars of childhood must understand this ambivalence as a social phenomenon inherent in the maturation of the young (34). But because of this ambivalence, Jans's theory cannot be universally applied. Maturity becomes arbitrary, and each child's circumstances are different. Sharon is twenty, but she is still a financial dependent of her parents. Thus, she becomes representative of the challenge of ambivalence presented by the intersection of children's rights and children's active participation.

The rest of this chapter will raise questions about the roles played by both adults and children in *The Snapper* and examine how their confused behaviour suggests an anxiety towards Sharon's in-between state. In the novel, this behaviour works in tandem with humour in order to point to the way the text attempts to elide serious issues. This suppression creates an overall anxiety connected to Sharon's own disquietude. Since all these ambivalent behaviours and unsettling absences occur in a novel primarily about the precarious position of Sharon, they become automatically connected to her in-between state. As a child (but at the same time not quite a child) who is also bearing a child, Sharon is at a crossroads between children's citizenship and women's citizenship. Her

ambivalent situation problematizes my use of theories from both arenas, because Sharon's situation cannot be fully applied to either of them. Jans's theory of active participation and Conrad's theory of self-determination respectively deal with children and women; Sharon is in a position where she could be considered both of these, or neither. The anxiety she feels and projects in the novel reflects that which is engendered when the legal and theoretical boundaries in which we work do not encompass the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Just as the aforementioned theories *should* gesture toward a straightforward model of active citizenship (but are not foolproof guides for all potential scenarios—such as the one that arises for those girls who are in-between the categories of child and woman), we know Sharon *should* assert her rights and identify her attacker, but her situation is more complicated than that.

2.2 Wishy/washy child/adults

Sharon's disjointed behaviour shows that her character does not undergo a steady progression of development in the novel. Her actions are convoluted and unsure; she is assertive and bold, but she constantly second-guesses herself and is easily influenced by the opinions of others. Her ambivalence is related to her status as part-child, part-adult. Although she knows she must take responsibility for her actions and act as a mother to her child, she is unsure of the role she will fulfill in her own family once mother and daughter come home from the hospital. At one point, she claims to have a desire to find an apartment of her own, but her action is simply a ruse intended to make her father think

twice about the way he has been judging and ignoring her. Her ploy is shrewd, but adolescent. Doyle allows us to briefly hear her thoughts, which demonstrate that although she is capable of putting on a show of false remorse, the intentions behind her performance are those of an immature young girl:

She didn't want to be by herself, looking after herself and the baby. She wanted to stay here so the baby would have a proper family and the garden and the twins and her mammy to look after it so she could go out sometimes. She didn't want to leave. (287)

Sharon knows that she still needs the support of the adults in her life. At the same time, she still wants to "go out sometimes" and so does not want to give up what little independence she has.

It is important to note that although Sharon employs manipulative tactics that are generally wrought from years of experience, her strategies of negotiation do not go beyond her own home. When it comes to the wider community, Sharon is a bit of a follower, and her thoughts at night before she goes to sleep illustrate the extent to which she is affected by the opinions of others:

Soon everyone would know [...] She could nearly hear them.
-Sharon Rabbitte's pregnant, did yeh hear?
-Your one, Sharon Rabbitte's up the pole.
-Sharon Rabbitte's havin' a baby.
-I don't believe yeh!
-Jaysis.
-Jesus! Are yeh serious?
-Who's she havin' it for?
-I don't know.
-She won't say.
-She doesn't know.
-She can't remember.
-Oh God, poor Sharon.
-That's shockin'.

-Mm.
 -Dirty bitch.
 -Poor Sharon.
 -The slut.
 -I don't believe her.
 -The stupid bitch.
 -She had tha' comin'.
 -Serves her righ'.
 -Poor Sharon.
 -Let's see her gettin' into those jeans now. (Doyle 206-207)

Notably, Sharon laughs at these thoughts, convincing herself that she does not care what anyone thinks: she tells herself to "fuck them" and stop worrying (Doyle 207). But her ambivalence quickly takes control in the very next sentence, when she admits that she cannot help but worry (207).¹⁴

Besides her worry about the neighbours, there is much more evidence in the text that suggests Sharon is uncertain about her pregnancy and the event that caused it; this uncertainty leads to anxiety because she does not know how to proceed in her in-between state. While reading a book about pregnancy in an attempt to identify the emotions she might be feeling, Sharon admits that the only thing she really feels is "confused" (Doyle 160). When she is alone she cries, but simultaneously keeps telling herself that she "doesn't care." She admits she is "kind of looking forward to being a mother" (304) but at the same time she is "worried sick" (305). She makes sure to eat the exact foods prescribed for her in her pregnancy book, yet she often goes to the pub to drink until she is "pissed" (274). Even at the end of the novel, in the first moments she spends alone with her new baby, it is unclear whether she is laughing or crying.

¹⁴ Sharon's anxiety is also present in the film, which stages this scene in her bedroom, with the faces of her friends and neighbours closing in on her: they are under and around her bed and moving along her walls. This vision shows that Sharon is worried sick about her reputation and that she has allowed the opinions of her neighbours and friends to control her behaviour.

The fact that Sharon's devil-may-care attitude is only skin deep suggests that there is a more profound anxiety lying underneath her outward actions. Her deep-seated fears find ways to manifest themselves even when she has been repressing them, which becomes evident not only when she projects her own worry onto her neighbours but also when she fitfully wakes from a dream about "having miscarriages" (Doyle 304). In a cold sweat, she recounts how "they all lived, hundreds of them, all red and raw and folded over. All crawling all over her. And she lay there and more of them climbed out of her" (304). Of course, it is normal for a pregnant woman to fear the loss of her unborn baby, but the discordant image of a living miscarriage demonstrates an ambivalence that reflects Sharon's own ambiguous position. Further, the lack of control suggested by her supine position and the way the babies make her skin crawl echo the helplessness and repulsion inherent in her sexual assault. Just as she refuses to name her attacker, she also refuses to name the tiny foetuses, so that the reader is left to infer that they are indeed the intended referent for the pronouns "them" and "they" (304). The anxiety of this dream induces the same tension Sharon felt in her earlier vision of the neighbours who gossiped around her bed.

Sharon's heightened degree of worry about her pregnancy, paired with her economic dependency and the extent to which she is influenced by others, gestures towards her status as part-child and part-adult. Also, her inability to ask for help despite the fact that she desperately wants it confirms that she is too emotionally immature to express her needs, tell the truth about what has happened to her, and demonstrate resilience and the capacity for renegotiation—not only in her home, but also in her

community—despite the social changes that this new information would engender.

Whereas adulthood consists of demonstrating an ability to negotiate one's social position in the wider community, Sharon is so scared of the consequences of her actions that she does not even consider disclosing the identity of her unborn child's father. Instead, she refuses to tell anyone what has happened, despite her loneliness. Both near the beginning and towards the end of her pregnancy, Sharon "wished[s] she'd someone to talk to" (Doyle 334). Her emotional immaturity is demonstrated by the fact that she has not formed any deep, meaningful connections with anyone around her, including her family and friends:

She felt a bit lonely now. She'd have loved someone to talk to, to talk to nonstop for about an hour, to tell everything to. But—and she was realizing this now, really—there was no one like that. She'd loads of friends but she only really knew them in a gang [...] Jackie had been her best friend for years but now that was only because she saw her more often than the others, not because she knew her better. She'd never have been able to tell Jackie about what had happened. They'd often talked about fellas; what he did and how he did it and that sort of thing, but that had only been for a laugh; messing. They hadn't spoken seriously about anything to do with sex since—since Sharon had her first period. Or they'd pretended it wasn't serious. It was always for a laugh. Giggling, roaring, saying things like,—I swear, Jackie, I was scarleh. (Doyle 182)

Sharon's feelings highlight the extent to which her relationships with the people around her remain at the surface level, elementary and undeveloped. She is left to carry the burden of her secret by herself, which is unfortunate because validation might have provided her with the courage needed to name the child's father. Without a second opinion, she cannot think of the "proper name" for what happened between her and Burgess (Doyle 267). Clearly, she has not yet learned what makes an emotionally healthy relationship, and she is uncertain about what constitutes a violation of her rights.

Despite Sharon's emotional immaturity, some might argue that by choosing not to identify her attacker, Sharon has actually asserted her rights—specifically, her right to determine the course of her own life. Perhaps her repulsion toward Burgess after the attack may be an indication that she has given more thought to identifying the father than the reader is led to believe, and that she is actually taking the necessary precautions to prevent him from ever being part of the child's life. At the same time, Section 6 of the 1964 Guardianship of Infants Act states that the mother is to be the sole guardian of a child born outside of marriage. In other words, even if Burgess became aware of his status as the child's father, he would have absolutely no legal right to be part of the baby's life. Therefore, the legal prohibition of father-status in this case makes it seem as if Sharon's concerns are related to the potential social effects of public disclosure, not its legal implications. Of course, in light of her fears about the negative attitudes of neighbours and friends, it is more probable that she is held back by the fear that any disclosure would affect the social dynamics of her close-knit neighbourhood. Burgess is connected to Sharon's family in several ways—his daughter is one of Sharon's closest friends, and he is her younger brother's soccer coach and one of her father's drinking buddies—and Sharon's decision is probably the result of her concern about potential damage to these ties. Because Sharon is so young and apparently unaware of what constitutes rape, she is embarrassed to admit that she has had sex with an older, married man with a "dirty big belly" (Doyle 256).

Further, she is likely worried that the arbiters of the law might fail her. McGlynn notes that Ireland's pervasive willingness to blame the victim—such as is seen in "so

many rape trials"—could indeed be a factor behind Sharon's diffident second-guessing about whether or not she gave sexual consent to Burgess (*Narratives of Class* 107). Then, there is also the possibility that Sharon's neighbours and friends could choose not to believe her side of the story. After all, when rumours that Burgess may be the father begin circulating, his daughter Yvonne—once such a good friend of Sharon's—maliciously tells everyone that her father paid Sharon for sex and that Sharon "led him on" (Doyle 273-274). That such vicious gossip could spread as a result of hearsay legitimizes Sharon's fears that the truth would beget a full-fledged scandal.

It is telling that the literary signs that underscore Sharon's fears—her inability to negotiate her position in the wider community, her constant ambivalence and worry about the opinions of others, and the underlying tension manifested in her dreams and visions—are the same ones that point to her in-between state. She is capable of making her own decisions but she still needs guidance in doing so. In the same vein, as a child-adult who is bearing a child as a result of sexual assault, she is in a unique position to participate in her society: she has been violated, but she is old enough to make decisions as a result of this violation. Unfortunately, she does not take any action against her attacker, because despite suspicions that she *could* do so, the risks associated with such action are too significant for her to even consider. The ambivalence she experiences throughout her pregnancy because of these circumstances results in her perpetual state of worry and apprehension.

It becomes even more obvious that Sharon's anxiety is linked to the ambivalence of her in-between state, and the overall ambivalence of current childhood in general,

when the other characters in the novel begin to demonstrate their own ambivalence toward her position. The adults in the novel are as wishy-washy as Sharon, and seem just as immature because of it. Burgess goes from bragging about his sexual escapades with Sharon in the local pub to grovelling with Sharon to make sure she does not tell his wife about what happened; then, in his middle-age crisis, he leaves his wife in secret pursuit of a life with Sharon. Eventually, when he realizes that Sharon will have none of this, he returns home to be with his wife. Jimmy is similarly ambivalent about his feelings toward Sharon's pregnancy: at first, he is pleased for her, agreeing with his buddies at the pub that she is a "modern girl" (205). But when Burgess leaves home and people start to wonder if he might be the child's father, Jimmy is so embarrassed that his daughter might have had sex with a middle-aged married man that he completely stops talking to her and comes home from the pub with a bloody nose to make her feel guilty that he had to "defend her honour" (277). Then, after Sharon threatens to move out, Jimmy becomes overprotective of her, offering to be present in the delivery room when she has the child.

Even Veronica is uncertain how she feels. At first, she claims that "it's not right" that Sharon got pregnant outside of marriage (149), but when Burgess's wife shows up on the Rabbitte's doorstep armed with insults for the girl who has been "messin' around" with her husband, Veronica's guardian instincts take over; she punches Doris Burgess in the nose (252). The juvenile actions of the adults in the novel reflect the part of Jans's theory that claims maturation is part of both childhood and adulthood.

Clearly, since none of the adults in the novel know how to deal with Sharon's sensitive position, she is not alone in her ambivalence. But the reader is also forced to

deal with similar conflicting emotions as the story progresses. First of all, we do not learn how Sharon has become pregnant for over forty pages, despite the fact that the entire novel is based upon this event. Then, despite Sharon's eventual contention that the child's father is a random Spanish sailor, we know that few people in the text actually believe her story.¹⁵ Anxiety is generated by the way controversy is hidden in the text. The issues of sexual assault and abortion are both casually swept under the rug.

In the section to follow, I will discuss the way uncomfortable issues become eclipsed through an examination of Barrytown's omnipresent humour, which serves to further preserve the neighbourhood's culture of avoidance. Just as the characters try to quell their own worry through jokes and "slagging" (McGlynn, *Narratives of Class* 108), Doyle's comic realism intentionally diverts our focus from the more serious concerns in the novel. Consequently, tension arises between the novel's humour and the deeper issues obscured by this humour. The action occurs in-between this lighthearted humour and the weightier problems that remain veiled, so that the novel becomes a site of anxiety similar to that felt by Sharon.

¹⁵ At the end of the novel, Sharon names her baby daughter Georgina (the female version of George) in order to show that she "refuses to apologize for her child" (White 71); even though she has desperately tried to hide the identity of the child's father, the neighbours have guessed that it is George Burgess. Still, Sharon never once admits that Burgess is the father; rather, she sticks to her story about a Spanish sailor. But it is obvious that the members of her family know the truth and have chosen to willingly participate in Sharon's deception in an attempt to save face. When Jimmy asks Veronica whether she believes her daughter's story, she tells her husband to "shut up" (Doyle 258). Sharon also drops various hints that she has lied: after Jimmy learns his lesson about ignoring Sharon, he tells her that he loves her and that he will love the baby too. Sharon tentatively asks: "What if it looks like Mister Burgess?" (292). The father and daughter turn the question into a joke, but the potential that the baby actually *might* look like Burgess still remains.

2.3 A "very fuckin' complicated" situation

By the time Sharon's due date is upon them the Rabbitte family, and Jimmy in particular, begins to acknowledge the precarious nature of Sharon's position. Sitting on the couch reading about pregnancy with Sharon, Jimmy cries out, "It's very fuckin' complicated, isn't it?" (Doyle 300). But his words speak to more than the physical intricacies of pregnancy, gesturing towards the ways that Sharon's in-between state makes her pregnancy more "complicated" than pregnancy might be typically conceived. Sharon's status as part-child part-woman contributes to his vexed interpretation, and becomes an impetus for his avoidance of the subject of her pregnancy through humour.

Barrytown's culture of avoidance is evident in the way *The Snapper* is written. The prose mostly consists of witty dialogue, which leaves little room for prose analysis of the issues presented by the plot. Characters rarely have conversations that consist of anything more than teasing and everyday parley; the topics of their quick and witty banter do not go far beyond their own neighbourhoods. They seldom speak multiple sentences together before getting a response. Further, the novel is peppered with silences and the reader is forced to piece together bits of information in order to better understand Sharon's intentions. This is made ironic by the fact that little access is allowed into Sharon's thoughts throughout the novel; her feelings remain uncertain. Even when her emotions are revealed, anxiety and uncertainty result because Sharon's inner thoughts are mostly *about* anxiety. Also, important aspects of these emotions are left unacknowledged and unexplored; there is a constant implication of deeper issues without any direct admission that they exist. Sharon's failure to acknowledge her sexual assault—either

publically or to herself—leaves open the question of whether her avoidance is the result of embarrassment or if she is genuinely unaware of what constitutes rape. The ambivalent actions outlined above suggest that she is afraid of the public disgrace that might be caused if it were known that she had sex (willingly or unwillingly) with a middle-aged married man, but her admission that she does not know if what happened could be called rape hints that she is genuinely uninformed about sexual assault. Perhaps she has not been educated about her own rights as a child or a woman.

Either way, humour is Sharon's strategy for deflecting attention away from the circumstances of her pregnancy. From the beginning, she is forced to make light of her situation and mute her sense of violation, using a made-up story about a Spanish sailor to deflect suspicion from Burgess. Then, because affairs in Barrytown are never secret or private, joking around with her friends becomes a coping mechanism and a way for her to make sure the identity of her unborn child's father remains a secret. To publicly render the issue as serious as it actually is would be to bring additional attention to her circumstances, and she needs to avoid this extra attention because of her own embarrassment and to preserve her family's social ties and reputation.

In the novel, humour becomes a survival mechanism so that Sharon can prove to herself that she does not need to fear Burgess or the pregnancy he has caused. But her laughter—born out of the need to survive in a working-class neighbourhood—is repressive because it enables her to ignore the seriousness of the issues she is facing. Thus, her humour allows her to minimize her tragedy and fail to assert her rights as an active citizen; it also prevents Burgess from being villainized—even though, by sexually

assaulting Sharon, he has taken her rights away. When Sharon jokes around with her family and friends about the pregnancy, her actions do the same thing as the derogatory, female-specific local slugging that "obscures the possibility of rape" in Burgess's own mind (McGlynn, *Narratives of Class* 108). Then, because of the comic nature of the novel and the film, the possibility of rape becomes obscured.

One issue that is glossed over *without* using humour in the novel is the possibility of abortion for Sharon. It is notable that for all her ambivalence, abortion is the one issue about which she appears to have strong ethical viewpoints; further, it seems to be the only thing about which she is completely definitive. When her parents ask whether she will "keep" the baby, she provides them with such a stock response ("Abortion's murder") that I am left wondering about the reasons behind it (Doyle 150): Has she actually given the abortion question any critical thought? Or, does she push the idea out of her mind because it is too difficult for her to fathom? Or, has the novel refused insight into such thoughts? Is she just saying this because she knows it is what her parents will want to hear? Certainly, the novel gives no indication that pregnancy is something to which Sharon has previously given much thought.

Perhaps Sharon *has* thought long and hard about what she would do in such a situation, although there is evidence in the novel to suggest otherwise. Sharon is not one who regularly thinks about her emotions and how things make her feel. When she becomes pregnant, she has to borrow a book from the library to learn about the changes her body will undergo during pregnancy; tellingly, the book also details some of the emotional changes often felt by pregnant women, but this section only leaves Sharon

more confused. After her failed attempt at soul-searching, she becomes more inclined to read about what is happening to her physically, not emotionally. Also, Sharon's thoughts are constantly focused on how to hide the identity of the father, and she never once critically examines all the alternatives open to her. The possibility that Sharon might allow the baby to be adopted by a family who wants it is left unmentioned, and the abortion question is never raised again.

Jimmy, too, avoids the deeper emotional implications of serious issues through his use of humour. His tendencies reveal an underlying anxiety and in turn also point to the silences in the text. Everything he talks about with his buddies in the pub is turned into a joke, and when conversations at home become more complicated than the banal ones on television he shows instant signs of distress, "getting red" and changing the subject by offering money to his children to go buy sweets (Doyle 272). Of course, Jimmy comes by his surface mentality honestly; his friends constantly make fun of each other to try to be funny. But when these friends start being careful about what they say around him because they know he is embarrassed about Sharon, Jimmy is quick to catch on and says to Bimbo: "I don't like [the guys being] nice. I prefer them the other way; bollixes" (Doyle 269). He probably does not realize why, but Jimmy knows that he prefers to use humour instead of having to try to come to terms with the more meaningful facets of his relationships.

Several comments made by Jimmy further hint that there is a more profound sense of irony created through absences than what the text might initially suggest. McCarthy notes the ingenuousness behind one of Jimmy's comments while watching a television

news story about child abuse in the UK: "At least it's not goin' on over here," he says (Doyle 244). His words point out the irony of his ignorance; it *is* indeed going on—his daughter's pregnancy is the result of sexual abuse—but he has chosen not to consider that it might have been abuse that led to her condition. When he later mentions the news program to his buddies at the bar, they start imagining hypothetical situations that might get adults in trouble, but as soon as sexual abuse is hinted at—"Yeh have to [...] mess around with their— —"—they chide themselves for turning the issue into a joke and the subject is quickly changed (Doyle 249). Later in the novel, Jimmy sings along to the radio, and the words of the song reflect his blindness to the abuse right in front of him, alerting us to the surface mentality perpetuated by his constant use of humour: "I'M THE GREAT PRE-TE-HENDER" (Doyle 335). Indeed, Jimmy *is* good at pretending that everything is funny when it actually is not, though this method of coping with anxiety is elementary.

Jimmy's words reveal more than his naïveté, though: they point to the text's avoidance of the abuse that caused Sharon's pregnancy to begin with. We are much more attuned to Jimmy's words because of all the "pretending" that characters engage in throughout the novel: Sharon pretends she has been impregnated by a Spanish sailor, the Rabbittes' pretend that they believe her, and Burgess pretends that his assault was as much Sharon's fault as his. These lyrics—coming from the mouth of Jimmy, whose character has become almost as large as Sharon's—also alert the reader to the fact that the story, and our attention, should really be fixated on Sharon. Sharon's ironic absence from much of the text as a result of this focus on Jimmy points to the other gaps that exist

within it, such as the lack of explicit acknowledgement of the sexual assault that occurred to make Sharon pregnant in the first place and the lack of textual space to deal with alternatives for Sharon's unborn child. The song's lyrics thus underline the ironical evasion of serious issues related to women and children on the part of the novel's characters.

The ambivalent tension created by the novel as a result of its silences and humour is connected to the anxiety demonstrated by Sharon, Burgess, Jimmy and Veronica, who are left baffled about what to do when they learn of Sharon's condition. This uncertainty is heightened since Sharon's level of emotional maturity already places her in an in-between position. Some critics argue that *The Snapper* illustrates Sharon's maturation from child to adult (Cronin 57-58; White 68). However, the novel cannot be conceived of as a bildungsroman because Sharon, although physically an adult, still exhibits emotionally childlike traits *after* she gives birth. Caramine White claims that, by naming her baby Georgina, Sharon "advertis[es] and glorif[ies] the baby's difference" and "forc[es] others to accept" the child's paternity (71). Her actions, writes White, show that she has achieved a "sense of personal independence" (71). But Sharon's strategy is passive-aggressive; instead of directly addressing the issue of the child's paternity, she makes a joke out of it. Thus, Sharon's final action of the novel serves to underline her adolescence, not her maturity.

Together with Sharon's ambiguous in-between position, the anxiety created by the novel's silences and humour can be linked to what critics have noted in terms of the way simultaneous progression and regression make it seem as if Barrytown's society is neither

moving forward or backward. In the novel, both silences and humour present their own ambivalence; on the surface, they are comedic, but they inadvertently point to serious women's issues. It is possible that some will read *The Snapper* as a comedy and give no thought whatsoever to gender equality, sexual assault or abortion—issues that are clearly present in the novel and within the “new” Irish spirit. The way the novel glosses over these issues using humour creates an ambivalence that threatens to undo aspects of progression within the arena of women's rights in “new Ireland.” As much as new Irish attitudes have become embedded in the nation's culture, deeply-entrenched conservative values continue to manifest themselves.

Applying Sharon's case to theories of active citizenship for children and women also presents an ambivalent dilemma. Even though Sharon lives in a society governed by laws that can potentially address her situation and ensure that her attacker is brought to justice, her anxiety (caused by the tension between contemporary attitudes towards pregnancy and residual patriarchal attitudes about childbearing) prevents her from coming forward. Not a child but not yet an adult, she does not effectively assert her rights of citizenship and thus her case cannot be neatly applied to theories of participation and self-determination. Sharon's in-between state at the onset of her pregnancy underlines the precarious status of children who have children in contemporary Ireland. It also demonstrates that, for girls who find themselves in ambiguous positions, theories of children's citizenship and women's rights cannot necessarily provide an appropriate mode of action to ensure that their needs are adequately met.

The next chapter will explore a similar ambiguity in Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River*. O'Brien's novel artistically renders the events of the 1992 X case, a court proceeding that brought to light issues about children's rights and abortion through its extensive attention in the Irish press. The novel creates a new narrative about the case by fictionalizing the factual events. But O'Brien's use of the novel form is problematic because it does not effectively rally support for the rights of young girls who have children in Ireland today. Instead, the fictional rendering of factual events in *Down by the River* winds up demonstrating empathy for those on *all* sides of the abortion debate. Just as citizenship theories are difficult to apply to Sharon's case in *The Snapper*, *Down by the River* illustrates the difficulties inherent in applying the details of a real-world judicial proceeding to a literary and ethical examination of issues particular to women and girls.

Chapter Three

Down by the River: Pushing Boundaries through the Adaptation of

Fact to Fiction

Edna O'Brien's 1990's trilogy (*House of Splendid Isolation*, *Down by the River*, and *Wild Decembers*) continues her interest in interrogating taboo subjects such as issues of female identity and sexuality, violence and self-destruction, and power relations between man and woman in patriarchal twentieth-century Ireland. Critics readily acknowledge the politics at work in O'Brien's fiction, generally, and *Down by the River*, with its fictionalization of the 1992 X case, is no exception. In a survey of critical responses to O'Brien's work, Lindahl-Raittila writes that over the years many critics have dismissed O'Brien's writing as "pornography disguised as literature" and "neo-feminist propaganda" (74). Rebecca Pelan fears that, even today, the "intrusive subject-matter" so central to O'Brien's work has too often been criticized as unsuitable or ignored as unimportant (74). In the following critical history, I will delve into some of the controversial issues that have been noted by critics, including abortion, the lack of empathy demonstrated by the Catholic Church, the failure of the Church to ensure the well-being of women and children in Ireland, and the abjection and silencing of women. That discussion will lead into a consideration of the way O'Brien's adaptation of the X case into fiction demonstrates that girls in Ireland deserve to actively assert their own citizenship and participate in making important decisions about their lives. In her article "Petrifying Time: Incest Narratives from Contemporary Ireland," Christine St. Peter

writes that *Down by the River* "pushes the imagination beyond the fictive text [and back] into the world where real change has to be created" (142). I agree and argue further that O'Brien uses the empathy involved in adaptation to push forward and demand change in the arena of children's rights in Ireland.

St. Peter places *Down by the River* within a subgenre of Irish women's "exile" writing, which includes stories of unwanted pregnancy, criminalized abortion, rape and incest and thus gives "artistic form to radically new content" (*Changing Ireland* 46). This content is "new" precisely because the Irish state has been so bound up in ties with the Catholic Church that attempts to speak openly about sex have largely been silenced. Indeed, Roman Catholic ideology has helped construct traditional family roles that maintain those "gendered systems of dominance and subordination, control and acquiescence" and lead to the criminalization of abortion in the first place (St. Peter, "Petrifying Time" 126-7). Heather Ingman writes that Ms. X's experiences, and in turn Mary MacNamara's, expose the anti-abortion rhetoric of the Catholic Church "as a violent form of nationalist identity politics in which a coherence is established between the materiality of the nation (as it is manifested in the state judicial structure) and the materiality of women's bodies" (qtd. in Ingman 190). In the same vein, Irish reproductive justice scholar Kathryn Conrad notes that the way the Irish nation has fixed the foetus as an autonomous entity is in line with the symbolic fixation of Ireland's national boundaries to make itself appear to be the "last bastion of moral and sexual purity," secure from outside attacks (qtd. in Conrad 160). In this, she says, Ireland has achieved a distinctive identity within Europe through its denial to women of full rights of

citizenship (Conrad 161). Ireland's official political stance in abortion debates reflects its "desire to remain 'fetal'—a political entity unwilling fully to [sic] acknowledge its relationship with a changing [...] Europe" (Conrad 172).¹⁶

Heather Ingman criticizes the words of fictional female fanatics who reproduce this stance in the novel; they attempt to possess Mary's body by insisting that the foetus is "not [Mary's] child," thus insinuating that both foetus and mother belong to the Church and state (Ingman 190). It is through characters such as these pro-life fanatics—who manipulate Mary and "use her for their own purposes," without consideration of her "health, her future life, or her own desires" (Norton 83)—that O'Brien's stance on the X case and the Irish abortion debate becomes clear: she believes it is the girl's choice, alone, to decide to terminate or continue with the pregnancy. Thus, in her adaptation, she pushes the aforementioned "moral" boundaries that have been so carefully placed by the Irish nation. Ann Norton calls *Down by the River* "a fierce defence of legal abortion and an exhortation of what O'Brien presents as the personal hypocrisy [and] fanaticism of its opponents" (83-84). Norton claims that Mary's distinctly Joycean epiphany at the end of the novel reflects her recognition of these hypocrisies and "the value of love as Christ preached it and not as patriarchal religious regimes interpret it" (85). This notion that the Catholic Church does not always practice the love that it preaches—and that the Church's interpretations of religious doctrine are often inconsistent with the tenets it holds in

¹⁶ Publicity around the December 2009 court case *A. B. and C. v Ireland*, held before the European Court of Human Rights, continues to underscore the discrepancies between Ireland and the rest of Europe in the arena of women's rights. Katherine Side quotes the chief executive of the Irish Family Planning Association, who claims that Ireland's intention not to make changes to its current interpretation of its law places the nation "outside of the human rights family in Europe, which is a fairly cold place to be" (35).

highest regard—will become particularly significant in the discussion to follow, as well as in the main body of this chapter.

Despite the individual autonomy that has been afforded to both foetus and mother in Ireland, however, boundaries become blurred as a result of Mary's level of maturity in *Down by the River*. Like Sharon, Mary holds the in-between position of part-child, part-adult. She is physically mature enough to reproduce but not yet emotionally mature enough to even properly describe the assault she has experienced. Linden Peach argues that it becomes clear through O'Brien's omniscient descriptions of Mary's thoughts that she "does not have the language to express what her father does to her" and is too emotionally immature to understand what is happening (*Contemporary* 76). Because she does not understand sex and intimacy, she describes the act according to how it makes her feel and what she experiences via her senses. Thus, the horror of what happens can only be articulated thus:

Darkness then, a weight of darkness except for one splotch of sunlight on his shoulder and all the differing motions, of water, of earth, of body, [...] An empty place, a place cut off from every place else and her body too, the knowing part of her body getting separated from what was happening down there [...] Criss-cross waxen sheath, uncrissing, uncrossing. Mush. Wet, different wets [...] O quenched and empty world. An eternity of time, then a shout, a chink of light, the ground easing back up, gorse prickles on her scalp and nothing ever the same again and a feeling as of having half-died. (O'Brien 4)

Mary's immaturity, highlighted through the lack of sexual terms she uses to describe her assault, shows that she does not fit within any distinct boundary; she is neither child nor adult. As I will argue in the sections to follow, her position goes hand in hand with

O'Brien's fictional adaptation of the X case to gesture towards a potential breach in the barriers to Irish reproductive justice.

3.1 Characterization, silence and entrapment

Critics have given much attention to the way O'Brien demonstrates empathy to all her characters in the novel, including those who do not treat Mary with the respect she deserves. Remarkably, O'Brien presents Mary's rapist in a more compassionate light than the female activists who try to protect the unborn child at the expense of Mary's well-being. Sophia Hillan claims that O'Brien treats Mary's father "with great delicacy"; he is "not portrayed as a monster" (152) but rather as a father who "loves his daughter" despite "his self-hatred and despair" (151). However, Hillan is quick to point out that in spite of the compassionate light in which she portrays him, O'Brien repeatedly demonstrates the "horror of [James MacNamara's] actions" (152). Norton writes extensively on the assault Mary endures, and claims that when Mary's father forces her to perform fellatio, "she thinks almost objectively about the experience as a physical union, describing it to herself both to minimize its terror [...] and to understand it, recognizing her father's essential humanity even as he commits violence" (89). Later in the novel, her father saves a mare and her foal by performing an emergency breech delivery, and Mary recognizes his "absolute and instantaneous rapport with the animal, so tender and true such as he had never shown her nor her mother or possibly anyone" (O'Brien 63). In this moment, says Norton, Mary sees that her father "is good as well as evil, that he has the

capacity for love even as he manifests its opposite" (91). In much the same way that the Catholic Church demonstrates this double capacity for compassion and cruelty, so too does Mary's father.

Other men in the novel also show more kindness and concern than the women who "mete out self-righteous punishment" for Mary's "dual sins of premarital sex and attempted abortion" (Norton 90). Norton notes the way in which the kindness and concern demonstrated by Mary's headmaster—who perceptively discerns the untold fact that Mary's father is also the father of the unborn child—is directly contrasted with the attitude of her friend's mother, who refuses to acknowledge the truth despite Mary's soiled undergarments: proof that she was violently raped (90). Further, the male judges sense the incestuous undertones of Mary's story despite the fact that, like Sharon Rabbitte, she never reveals the identity of her rapist. The women activists with whom Mary lives throughout the pregnancy fail to apprehend these connotations of rape on the part of Mary's father. Even though O'Brien is more compassionate toward her male characters than toward the female activists, she demonstrates authorial empathy to all. Norton views Mary's revelation at the karaoke bar at the end of the novel as "purer" than the typical Joycean epiphany precisely because it demonstrates the importance of "loving others for their own sakes" (86). Thus, O'Brien's "plea for mercy" extends to all her characters—"even, especially, those who use and hurt Mary" (Norton 84). This compassionate presentation of Mary's enemies leads Lindahl-Raittila to conclude that *Down by the River* actually performs the empathetic revelation called forth by the child ghost in O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation*: "The same blood and the same tears drop

from the enemy as from the self, though not always in the same proportion" (O'Brien 216). Given O'Brien's predilection for exploring empathy through her writing, I will return to that subject later in my own analysis of *Down by the River*.

In addition to empathy, critics have examined the way O'Brien uses entrapment and silence to underline the lack of critical discussion about issues related to women and children in Ireland, and thus point to the gridlock Ireland has reached in terms of these issues. Lindahl-Raittila points out that Mary is caged on all levels: her father wishes to possess her body sexually, the authorities attempt to control her physical movement throughout the country and abroad, and zealots attempt to control her every action (81). Perhaps the most explicit physical manifestation of Mary's entrapment is highlighted when O'Brien describes how "often at night [Mary] felt a foot hooking around her own or an arm clutching her" because the pro-life activists insist on sleeping in Mary's bed to prevent her from trying to escape or injure herself and the unborn child (O'Brien 186). The authorities, and the ideologies they propagate, also entrap Mary by silencing her. St. Peter points out that Mary's fear of speaking out is conflated with the trauma she experiences after her father forces her to perform fellatio; afterwards, she feels her tongue is "gone [...] stiff and defiled" (O'Brien 29). Her mouth and tongue become "enemies" (O'Brien 29) because of the actions her father has forced upon her and, as a result, she is silenced and refuses to speak to those around her. Mary's father is also silent, though Peach claims this silence is demonstrated through use of "evasive" language through which James denies "the reality in which he is engaged"; his silence is different from Mary's because it is the result of avoidance (*Contemporary* 76). In placing these two

very different manifestations of silence side by side, O'Brien hints at the many and varied reasons why silence has permeated discussions about abortion, incest, and child abuse in Ireland.

Silence and entrapment are closely intertwined with the idea of abjection in *Down by the River* and, together, they illustrate the extent to which Ireland's well-entrenched patriarchal attitudes have created the current abortion and sexual assault legislation. They also underline how this legislation enslaves young girls and leaves them with nowhere to turn. Lindahl-Raittila discusses the ways in which Mary is humiliated and degraded: dubbed "Mary Magdalene" by angry pro-lifers on a local radio show, she is "chased by the media and talked about in every corner of the country [...] a prisoner who is watched every minute of the day" (81). Several critics have focused on how the novel portrays attempts by the Catholic Church to quell women's freedom of choice. Heather Ingman draws attention to the way religious iconography denies maternal subjectivity in the novel, by insinuating itself into all aspects of Mary's life, including her bedroom—the private place where she should feel most safe and at ease—which, in Dublin, she shares with the pro-lifers and which at home is "dominated" by a statue of the Virgin Mary (190). Ingman makes the powerful argument that this statue becomes a physical reminder of the abuse Mary has suffered and of the fact that because of this abuse she cannot live up to the Church's ideals of chastity (190). The novel thus confirms "the accuracy of Kristeva's argument that the Catholic construct of the Virgin Mary has been used to silence and control women" (Ingman 190). Ingman argues that Mary, and her right to

choose what happens to her, ultimately features as the abject of the Irish nation in the novel.

But by the end of the novel, Mary is neither abject, entrapped nor silent. According to Ingman, her spontaneous miscarriage is her body's way of "provid[ing] her with a way out" (191). Similarly, the tears she sheds become an impetus to the final outcome of her situation; because she has no other outlet for her emotions, her body forces her to cry and her lawyer consequently understands "what she cannot speak out loud" and chooses to fight her case (Ingman 191). Mary breaks through her silence in much the same way that she undermines the forces that have attempted to imprison her body, choosing to sing at the karaoke bar at the end of the novel. Norton writes that Mary's song "may seem trivial," but that because she has been silenced by all levels of society, she is a character for whom "any self-assertion [is] risky": allowing herself to be heard is a major coup, both literally and figuratively (87).

In the final scene in the novel, the silence that before now was profoundly felt by Mary is transferred to the audience. O'Brien writes that this "sudden and melting silence" occurs because what the people in the audience are hearing is an "answer to their own souls' innermost cries" (265). Norton claims that it is because these people are able to get in touch with their "'innermost' selves, uncensored by social, political, or cultural rules or memories" that they are able to recognize Mary's position as a "scapegoat, and a human being who has suffered and survived," and thus give her their "reconciliation, respect, and love" (84). What critics have missed, though, is the role Mary's child-status has played in helping her to achieve this favour. It is not simply the audience's

recognition of her humanity that has permitted Mary to stand before them and be heard; it is also a result of their "innermost" instinct to care for and protect the girl because she is young and vulnerable, and their innate recognition that she epitomizes humanity because she is a *child*. Despite the fact that it shows empathy to all its characters, O'Brien's novel demonstrates that in the same way that the audience and disc jockey acknowledge Mary's right to sing, so too must the Irish state permit all its children to play a suitable role in determining the outcome of their own lives.

3.2 Adapting the story of an adapting individual

No critic of *Down by the River* has yet examined Mary's position in terms of children's citizenship; mention of it in the scholarship written about the X case is likewise scarce. Lisa Smyth has explored the X case in depth, but she analyzes it in terms of the feminist discourse articulated in the House of the Oireachtas that attacked the government's continued denial of full citizenship to women, not its denial of full citizenship to female children in particular (113).¹⁷ The fact that child citizenship is left unmentioned is surprising given the medium through which O'Brien chooses to tell Ms. X's story. The adaptation of fact to fiction points directly to the fact that Mary's

¹⁷ Smyth does mention that after the X case was over, "popular morality" shifted such that abortion in cases involving the rape of young girls was "for the first time regarded as morally permissible in the national press" (94). This shift in popular abortion discourse did not, however, lead to a call for abortion access in Ireland; rather, it focused on the right of young rape victims to travel abroad for the procedure. Smyth also points out that the status of Ms. X as a child did not disqualify her from the status of motherhood in the eyes of the court, despite the "contradiction in terms" suggested by the description of Ms. X as a "pregnant child": during the Supreme Court trial, Justice Hederman argued that "the state must, in principle, act in accordance with the mother's duty to carry out the pregnancy" (Smyth 95). Evidently, the laws as they stand do not make room for exceptions for the pregnant child who remains on Irish soil.

inconsistent age and circumstances are forcing her into adaptation herself. Both pregnancy and adolescence force the female body to adapt, and so Mary is forced to show that she is doubly adaptable, as both child and mother. In the rest of this chapter, I will unravel the way O'Brien goes from recognizing the real-life Ms. X's child-status, and empathizing with her position, to fictionalizing—and giving what St. Peter calls “new artistic form”—to Ms. X's situation (*Changing Ireland* 46). What is “unspoken or unspeakable” in the silence of the novel's final scene becomes artistically rendered and gestured towards, though perhaps not fully articulated, through O'Brien's work (*Changing Ireland* 46). Such full articulation is difficult because, as St. Peter writes, it is a “struggle” to “give convincing verbal form” to “radically new content” that has, until now, been beyond description (*Changing Ireland* 46). And to write a fictionalization of the X case in 1996—which, in Catholic Ireland, was largely beyond description at the time—would have made for content that was truly “radical” and “new.”

The struggle of the adaptation process is evident in O'Brien's work, as she adjusts the facts of the case in order to create a work of fiction. In the paragraphs that follow, I will examine the tension created as O'Brien attempts to give the respect due to the real-life story of Ms. X while also trying to create a new narrative, and how this tension relates to the citizenship that should be permitted for Mary—as it should have been for Ms. X.

3.3 Adapting to the challenges of adaptation

Because precise details of the X case have not been publically disclosed, O'Brien is largely able to take liberties with her fictionalization in *Down by the River*. Significant aspects of the story are changed, such as the identity of the attacker: the real-life Ms. X was attacked by her father's friend, but Mary is raped by her own father (Battles). However, O'Brien's overall purpose (to show that even though Ms. X was a child, it was her choice to decide to travel to England to terminate the pregnancy) becomes problematized as a result of her adaptation. The challenges that arise through adaptation are similar to those that emerge when Jans's theory is applied to the real world.

Ostensibly, some fictional changes to the original story strengthen the argument that abortion should have been permitted in the X case. Unlike Ms. X, Mary is attacked by her own father, and so the baby will be the result of incest; just as rape often makes abortion more justifiable in the eyes of moderates, rape and incest together would make it doubly justifiable. But on the other hand, Mary's unique circumstances make the ethics of her decision more complex than they were in the real-life story, since Mary refuses to reveal the identity of her attacker. Because she feels a familial duty to protect her father, she is unable to justify her reasons for needing to have an abortion. Thus, even though Mary's circumstances make it seem as if abortion might be a viable option, the fictional rendering complicates any argument that might be made about abortion in the real-life story. The fictionalization detracts from the argument that Ms. X should have been allowed to make her own decision about what happened to her unborn child.

The level of empathy demonstrated toward the fanatical pro-lifers also detracts from Mary's case: when the intentions of these women is made clear, it becomes slightly more difficult to sympathize with Mary's situation and come to an understanding of why active citizenship is so important for girls like her. In a description of one of the initial meetings of the pro-life group, one woman's thoughts are painstakingly revealed: she reflects on "the silenced creatures she had found in drawers and wardrobes and in bolster cases, like sleeping dolls; a little baby boy in a lavatory bowl, twins with binding twine around their necks [...]" (17). The leader of the group brings information and pictures to the meeting, which are meticulously described:

Rammed down their throats are the details of the tiny thing, when it starts to make a fist, suck its thumb, get hiccups, swim, do somersaults and even sneeze [...] Roisin is holding up two pictures, two contrasting pictures, a contented baby, curled up in a womb, and a torn baby, its body mangled, pools of black blood in the crevices and in the empty crater of its head. Arms go up, forearms go up which Roisin pulls aside, forcing them to look, to witness the butchery done in England and elsewhere by a clique of killers. She dilates on the methods—curettage, suction, salt poisoning, Caesarean. (O'Brien 16-17)

Reading such graphic passages, we cannot help but understand why these characters feel it is so important to protect the lives of the unborn. O'Brien's description appeals to the innate, primal parts of our human natures, which have been shaped to love and care for the young and vulnerable. But several questions remain: what if the mother of the unborn is young and vulnerable herself? Is it fair to treat the unborn with compassion at the cost of mistreating the mother who is bearing the child, especially when that mother is herself a child? Since so many women determined to end their pregnancies find some way to do so despite its illegality, does it not make more sense to regulate its practice to ensure that

the procedure is carried out using the most humane methods possible, and before the foetus is fully developed? Although the adaptation of fact to fiction is vexed, it opens up new possibilities for such cultural exploration. In the next section, I will show that even though O'Brien's fictionalization complicates the argument that young mothers should have control over the decisions made about their lives, the novel still provides a space through which important real-life questions about child citizenship can be considered.

3.4 Fiction and empathy

By adapting the story so that Mary is raped by her father O'Brien brings in the issue of incest, a moral and legal taboo, and thus permits the exploration of concerns gestured toward by the X case, though not directly related to it. Thus, although the attacker's identity at first seems to make the case more one-dimensional, it actually complicates the picture and raises more questions than the real-life story.¹⁸ Mary's conflicting feelings toward her father make it excruciatingly difficult for her to show authorities that she is justified in wanting to leave the country for an abortion. She is brutally afraid of her father because of his physical and sexual abuse of her, but, as Norton notes, she is unwilling to identify him as her attacker because she also recognizes his gentler side (Norton 91). Mary admits that she does not hate her father (O'Brien 235), and when the pro-life women take her in, she asks them to bring her back to him because

¹⁸ This twist on the real-life story reflects a public concern that arose as a result of the X case. According to Lisa Smyth, when the case exploded in the media, the Irish nation began asking what would happen in the case of rape by a family member (94). She suggests that *Down by the River* realizes "the close connection between the X case and concerns about incest," which she claims was "a major feature of the post-X case rupture in popular morality" (Smyth 94).

she realizes that she is lonelier with them than she ever was with him (188). Her anguish after James rapes her is not just for herself, but she also feels "sorrow for being witness to the outcast's forlornness of him" (85). Despite her ambivalence toward her father, though, Mary is certain about what must be done about the child she is having for him; unfortunately Betty, the one person able to help her, gets cold feet and brings her back to Ireland on the night before she is to terminate the pregnancy. Still, Mary is unwilling to implicate her father. Although her right to citizenship demonstrates that she should be able to travel freely, she fails to assert this right when she chooses to remain silent instead of justifying the reasons behind her decision.

But there is evidence to suggest that, even if Mary had named her attacker, the opinions of others would not necessarily have been swayed. Even though she never articulates (or even thinks) the words that would convict her father, everyone knows what has happened because Mary cannot help but drop hints throughout her pregnancy. Just as Barrytown knows who Sharon's attacker really is but never articulates this knowledge, there are numerous indications that Mary's family and friends suspect she has been sexually assaulted by her father, and that her father is also the father of her unborn child. First, Lizzie the neighbour almost catches James mid-rape in the henhouse (66); later, on a day trip to a local shrine, she nods knowingly and says that "God will understand" Mary's euphemistic message: "Please cure my father's epilepsy" (69). Another anonymous neighbour calls the authorities because she fears that "something funny [is] going on" at the MacNamara's, where "a man and his daughter [are living] alone" (72). When Mary's best friend Tara finds out about the pregnancy, she realizes the truth, in an

awful moment recalling having found Mary one day in an "atmosphere of terror, [her] bruises, her clothes on the floor beside her father's shoes, things so awful that she blanked them out" (148). Mary drops several hints of her own, trying with all her heart to make someone understand without actually saying the words: at one point, "staring into [Betty's] face and beyond it to the inner person," she admits that the baby "wouldn't be right"—that "it would be a freak" (125). She tells her lawyer that "her father would sooner [the unborn baby] was dead" (201).

Alone with their thoughts, the judges even admit to themselves that "the fact of [the rapist] being the father" makes the case "all the more sticky" (O'Brien 246). But these details affect their opinions very little, because in their next meeting they begin to quote the law books: "The unborn shall not be moved from the jurisdiction of the court...It's written...Sacrosanct" (253), demonstrating the black-and-white mentality of many who uphold the law in Ireland and everywhere else. The judges' words also underline the theocratic undertones of Irish legislation.¹⁹ But like the theories of Jans and Conrad, the law is not an exact science; in real-life situations that contain circumstances beyond those covered in the statutes, the law becomes complicated so that there is no way that it can be applied the same way with each new case presented. Situations are often more delicate than they appear, which is why we need lawyers and judges to interpret the law according to new situations that arise. Unfortunately, as the novel shows, sometimes even when judges are aware of these delicacies, they often refuse to examine them because the law does not provide for them; they choose instead to turn a blind eye in

¹⁹ The circumstances of the X case resulted in a constitutional amendment for which the Irish state, until the present day, refuses to develop relevant domestic legislation.

order to make the situation fit into their own mould of what they believe to be legally appropriate.

Despite the extenuating circumstances of certain situations, the X case and *Down by the River* show that there are clearly those who will not budge when it comes to upholding the laws they see in front of them. Ms. X was thirteen when she was raped by her father's friend, but the judges of her case did not acknowledge the desperation of her situation and condone her desire to have an abortion. Though they eventually ruled that she could go to London, their decision said nothing about Ms. X's right to an abortion in her own country. When O'Brien pushes the bar even further, so that Mary is raped and impregnated *by her own father*, she illustrates the judges' (both real and fictional) reluctance to delve deeper into the laws and find ways to apply them according to new circumstances. Despite the hopelessness of the children involved in both situations, the judges remain steadfast. In *Down by the River*, even though one would expect that the arbiters of the law would take the dire circumstance of incest into account, none of the judges steps up to acknowledge Mary's right to decide her fate and control what happens to her body as a result of something over which she had no control. O'Brien deliberately leaves out the final verdict, choosing instead to focus on Mary's miscarriage, in order to show that even if Mary had been permitted to travel, the decision that really matters was made before the case even began: Mary has no freedom over her body, as a woman or as a child, while in Ireland. Thus, even though O'Brien complicates the details of the real-life X case and problematizes the argument that Mary should have been able to assert her

right to citizenship, she demonstrates that the young women of Ireland should not have to publically justify the rationalities behind what they choose to do with their bodies.

O'Brien's fictionalization of the X case also allows her to colour certain characters by revealing their hypocrisy. In a short 5-page chapter entitled "Power," the Prime Minister of Ireland is introduced. Having just returned from a yachting vacation with his family, he is dallying with his mistress in their apartment when he is summoned to take a call from the Attorney General, regarding "a young girl [who] went over to England" (O'Brien 158). When he is informed that "the guards are afraid she'll go again," the Prime Minister instantly transforms from the philandering paramour into the statesman who is "doing the right thing": "Like hell she will," he says, fuming (158). Meanwhile, his mistress points out the duplicity of his actions: "Hundreds of girls go, Jock...Including me...Why one law for us and one for some poor girl" (159). The Prime Minister begins to spout excuses—"[The Attorney General] has the power to restrain her...He's only consulting me out of, out of decency" (159)—but even the mistress knows that there are loopholes available: "Tell your attorney to sit on it for forty-eight hours..." she says (259). In reality, there are ways for the fictional Prime Minister to buy some time,²⁰ and the Attorney General's actions have *not* been decent. The mistress's words sum up the double standards often practised by those in power, and their ability to exercise their moral codes only when it is convenient for them to maintain their position:

²⁰ The Irish Prime Minister has the power to decide whether a matter should come under his or her authority and in turn whether it should be brought under the responsibility of his department. In other words, in this situation the fictional Prime Minister could have at the very least called a meeting with his advisors (Department of the Taoiseach).

Decency! Men who can turn off the heart valve the way you turned off that fucking water jet. [...] And oh as much as I have loved you for the last ten years, I've hated you...I've seen you in action...Power...Power...The mighty ambrosia...Anything and everything and everyone would be sacrificed for that power. (O'Brien 159)

This fictional scene raises questions about how legal theories and constitutional documents prevent political and moral flexibility when interpreted using a black-and-white mentality.²¹ They also point to the ways power and hypocrisy operate in the minds of "men of principle" and "corporeal figures of knowledge and gravity [...] who know nothing of the road or the road's soggy secret" but who are yet called to "adjudicate upon it" (O'Brien 5-6).

But although O'Brien unsympathetically presents those exercising legal power over Mary, she does not portray these characters one-dimensionally. The judges presiding over Mary's case are humanized in a conversation between Judge Frank and his daughter. Fourteen-year-old Molly advocates for Mary during a drive to school, where she refuses to get out of the car unless her father promises "to let the girl go to England" (O'Brien 241). She asks her father to imagine what he would do if she had been raped and impregnated—"You would take me to England wouldn't you?" (242)—and, like the Prime Minister's mistress, calls him out for his hypocrisy:

You're not fourteen years of age and sick and vomiting and a thing inside you put there against your will, God knows how brutally, no, you're men, you're dignitaries, you hold the reins. Good men...Wise men, pillars of society; and you go to mass and the sacraments every Sunday, Daddy, and you meet that actress in the lane at night [...] Look, Daddy, I don't

²¹ Seán Dugan, who served as the government press secretary during the X case, has claimed that he recalls the arguments the case fuelled between Albert Reynolds (then Prime Minister) and Harry Whelehan (then Attorney General): Reynolds asked Whelehan to "think politically," but Whelehan was unmoving when it came to the case's "legal and constitutional implications" (Battles).

begrudge you. If you meet a woman with some bit of sparkle, why not, why not, have a tangle with her in a lane at night and why not walk back home, looking at the stars feeling that bit more romantic, but if you are that bit more romantic, Daddy, recall it, evoke it when you sit down to do your digestions. (O'Brien 242-243)

Unlike the Prime Minister, though, Frank listens to what is being said to him about empathy; his love for his daughter forces him to examine his own sense of humanity as he "watch[es] her walk off in her uniform, [...] think[ing] life without her would be the catacombs" (243). He recognizes that if his daughter, who is "not a girl and not yet a woman" (243) can empathize with both his own position as well as this girl's, he should be able to do so as well. Although he recognizes the dangers of "making sentiment of the law" (254) he realizes in this moment that he must examine the human side of the case, as well. The next day, speaking with one of the other judges right before the final verdict is decided upon, his words show that he holds his own opinions about those who adjudicate the law but know nothing about the real world in which the laws are broken: "I'm sure [the Attorney General's] a decent man...I'm sure he's led a decent sheltered life...Never had to rough it...Never stood around bars and got his nose bloodied and neither have you" (253). O'Brien thus uses the character of Judge Frank to show that even though some of her characters appear one-sided, there is often much more substance to them than what meets the eye.

Indeed, as several critics have mentioned, O'Brien presents even the most villainous characters, like Mary's father, multilaterally; James MacNamara is horribly abusive, but he is clearly also a very sad man who reveals his humane side through his treatment of the animals on his farm. Norton notes that the novel's male characters are

shown in a more positive light than the females, but even the female activists are not all bad (85). Roisin is fanatical and unmoving in her pro-life stance, and she treats Mary cruelly and with disrespect, but Noni's character is slightly more complicated. She is profoundly insecure and hosts the pro-lifers only because of the recognition that she will receive as a result:

It is not at all how Noni imagined it. She imagined tributes for her spick and span house, the blazing fire, the big logs, the spread in the kitchen, savouries under the hood of the stove to keep warm, knives and forks, daintily wrapped in a paper napkin as they might be for a wedding or a twenty-first. Wines and port wines and the cut glasses on the tray, the lustre of rainbows on them. 'It's home...It's what we call home,' she had imagined herself saying in answer to these manifold tributes [...] (O'Brien 18).

Noni holds this meeting of the women at her house because to be pro-life is to be fashionable, and to have a group of friends with whom to belong. There is no evidence that she has given any thought to the ethical or moral reasons behind her political stance. Later, when she finds the abortion brochure in Betty's wastebasket and subsequently makes the call to the authorities that forces Mary to come home, Noni acts because of the glory she will receive, not because she is significantly concerned about the unborn child:

Noni's finest hour has come. She already pictures herself on some sort of illuminated dais, the people coming to give thanks to her for what she has done. She pictures how she will relay it, in what detail will she not describe the random action of her moving from the range in Betty's kitchen [...] She will give pause before she enlarges upon the shock which she endured [...] the vile black print which read, 'Unwanted pregnancy—confidential advice.' She will describe [...] the clues falling in together as if by a piece of wizardry, the fact of Mrs Crowe saying they were off to Dublin, yet getting English money in the bank, buying Mary a nightie and a toilet bag, hiring a taxi from the city twenty miles away, in case a local driver informed [...] (O'Brien 131)

Noni's intentions become even clearer when she changes her tactics with Mary and her father. Even though she hurts Mary by reporting her to the authorities, when the young girl and her father are in Noni's presence she cannot help but be nice because she wants so badly to be liked by everyone. When Roisin and Mrs. Minogue angrily yell at Mary after she returns from England, Noni sticks up for her, claiming that the trip "was not [Mary's] doing" and suggesting that perhaps the girl is "too sick to talk" (151-152). She even tries to make sure James thinks well of her; when she hears that some journalists are writing a story insinuating that James is the father of his daughter's child, she tries to convince him to "defend [his] good name" and tell them that he is a "pillar of the community" (191). But despite the fact that Noni's previous choice to ensure Mary did not have an abortion was not malicious, it becomes difficult to fathom that she would go as far as protecting James just so that he will like her. Here, therefore, Noni's actions are double-edged. It seems as if she is simply looking out for her neighbour, but there is reason to believe that she knows more about the abuse than she is letting on: when Betty speaks with Mary's lawyer later in the novel, she admits that *everyone* in the community "knew, all along" what was happening in the MacNamara house but that they did not say anything because they were too "dumbfounded" (222). Betty's statement is powerful because it forces us to reconsider the intentions of characters that, earlier, could potentially have been explained away under the guise of naïveté, such as when Lizzie finds Mary's soiled undergarments, and when Tara tries to blank out Mary's bruises, nakedness and devastation when she finds her in the MacNamara's living room. Clearly, if Betty, Lizzie, Tara and Noni were suspicious of sexual assault, they should have come forward. In revealing both sides of characters like Noni, O'Brien shows how sometimes,

even though we do not necessarily agree with characters' actions, we can still come to understand why they do what they do. On the other hand, some actions cannot be explained away, no matter how much we analyze them.

Both *Down by the River* and the X case show that it is a violation of international human rights to disallow Irish women from travelling freely, and because it is common knowledge that thousands of women travel abroad for abortions every year, the novel and real-life case insomuch offer a powerful critique of the country's current abortion laws. Clearly, the legislation is ineffectual. As it stands, it does much the same thing as O'Brien's compassionate treatment of those on all sides of the abortion debate: by shedding light on the fact that the current laws, and so many of the pro-lifers who advocate for them, privilege compassion for the unborn over compassion for the living, the current situation in Ireland makes its own argument for change.²²

By taking the X case and moving it onto a fictional plane, empathy is demonstrated to all the characters involved in Mary's case. The adaptation of fact to fiction pushes the imagination onto a new level from which the thoughts, feelings, backgrounds and intentions behind the actions of the key players involved in the X case can be explored. The importance of empathy is even addressed by Mary as she prepares

²² Still, these issues remain unresolved and as problematic as ever. Earlier this year, the Attorney General for the X case publicly claimed he still felt that his decision to place an injunction on Ms. X's freedom was justified and that he was "not prepared to say [he] regret[ed] having to do his duty" (Battles). However, his words are not necessarily reflective of Irish opinion: a March 2010 poll commissioned by Marie Stopes International confirmed that public opinion in Ireland favours the right to abortion (Side 35). But women like A. B. & C., who were forced to bring *A.B. & C. v Ireland* to the European Court for Human Rights, demonstrate that abortion proceedings are still largely impossible within the Irish nation itself (Side 34).

for her court case, wishing and hoping that the judges will imagine how it feels to be in her shoes: "if [only] I could be the judges and they could be me," she laments (O'Brien 239). Mary knows that if she and the judges could "swap" places and they could see and understand "every bit of [her] life," they would sympathize with her predicament and rule in her favour (O'Brien 239). She fully understands empathy and finds it impossible to view anyone, including those who have deeply hurt her, in just one light: "You can think more than one thing about the same person at exactly the same time. You can think oodles of things and they are all different and they are all true" (O'Brien 9). Indeed, the work that the novel accomplishes in the arena of children's rights (by demonstrating the importance of permitting children to have a say in the decisions made about their own lives) in itself calls for the empathy involved in coming to this conclusion. It would be hypocritical to demand empathy for young girls who have children if adequate thought is not given to the reasons why some do not want girls to have such freedoms. Much of the time, these reasons cannot be quickly dismissed; they require the practice of empathy, just as Noni's ambivalent actions demand deeper exploration. The adaptation of the X case into fiction permits this analysis through empathy, particularly since Mary holds a unique in-between position.

At the same time, in juxtaposing compassion for those on both sides of the debate with the lack of sympathy given to Mary by the pro-lifers, O'Brien suggests that those who represent the pro-life side of the debate have become so obsessive and single-minded in their determination to protect the unborn that they have failed to love the mothers who are already very much alive. When Mary says that "you can think oodles of things [about

someone] and they are all different and they are all true," she adds a caveat to her thought: "one thing seems to be truer, the clandestine thing" (9). Here, Mary gestures towards my main argument that for all the varying facets in a person or character, if he or she has received empathy and fails to demonstrate it in the same measure, there must be a call for accountability. At the end of the novel, Mary realizes that the pro-lifers' "obsession with sex and sin" and their "focus on women as primarily sexual beings" ironically privileges the sanctioning of sexual desire over compassion and empathy (Norton 85). Such practices, which Norton points out are traditionally upheld by the Church, are ironically "exactly the opposite of [the Church's] apparent doctrinal intention" (Norton 85). *Down by the River* thus condemns the Church in its failure to demonstrate empathy in this regard, and attempts to lift the veil that it has placed with subtlety over the abortion debate in order to skew our perceptions of the aforementioned irony. Having "grapple[d] with Ireland's paternalistic Catholic culture" that denies freedom of expression and experience (Norton 85), Mary realizes through her epiphany at the end of the novel that, although the support of the adults around her has been indispensable, she deserves to actively assert her own citizenship and participate in making important decisions about her own life. The adaptation of the X case into fiction provides a space through which both sides of the debate can be explored through empathy. Thus, such adaptation is a necessary step in pushing Ireland beyond the black-and-white legislation that tried to prohibit Ms. X from leaving the country for an abortion.

In the next section, I will examine Peter Mullan's *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002), which as a social critique builds upon my analysis of empathy and the ways it has been

denied to so many young women in Ireland by the Catholic Church. Though it utilizes a much different style of presenting narrative than *Down by the River* or *The Snapper*, *The Magdalene Sisters* explores the intricacies that must be mastered by young girls in order to negotiate a level of agency and citizenship in the "real world" of Irish society.

Chapter Four

Girlhood and Agency in *The Magdalene Sisters*

Where *The Snapper* and *Down by the River* largely raise issues about the lost young girls of Ireland using narrative silences, *The Magdalene Sisters* is an obvious social critique of the way children who had children were treated throughout twentieth century Ireland. The film received instant critical acclaim at the Venice Film Festival, where it won the Golden Lion Award for Best Film (2002). Unfortunately, because its content questions aspects of world religion and Catholicism in particular, initial clerical response to the film was not as enthusiastic: a review by the Vatican's *L'Osservatore Romano* described the film as "an angry and rancorous provocation" (qtd. in McKiernan 30). A film critic for an Italian Catholic newspaper angrily walked out of the theatre mid-screening and, at various other festival screenings of the film, priests stood at the entrances of the theatres to warn Catholics that to watch would be sinful (Crowdus 26). After the film's commendation from some sectors in Venice, the Vatican condemned it and the festival as anti-Catholic (Crowdus 26)—a sentiment also shared by secular critics: reviewer Steven D. Greydanus claims that in the film director Peter Mullan "betrays his subject with smug Catholic-bashing" (qtd. in McKiernan 30). As I will explore in the chapter to follow, however, Mullan is often more sympathetic toward the Catholic Church than his subject matter calls for. Like O'Brien, in transforming fact into art Mullan demonstrates empathy to all his characters. After I outline the critical history of the film, I will discuss how Mullan's work differs from the others I have analyzed. Though its content broaches political questions similar to those raised by the other two works

studied, this text goes a step further by using a unique narrative strategy to show how agency for individuals can only be accomplished collectively.

The Catholic Church's response to *The Magdalene Sisters* did not come as a surprise, considering its similar reaction to Steve Humphries's *Sex in a Cold Climate*, a television documentary about the laundries that was aired on Ireland's Channel 4 in 1998. The Vatican called that work "admirable but misinformed" and sent an envoy to meet with some of the women involved (qtd. in Crowds 27). Later reports to the Pope claimed that his representatives had never encountered such "mass hysteria" among women and that Humphries's documentary had "created false memories among viewers" (Crowds 27). Catholic authorities apparently remain unconvinced about the level of damage that has been inflicted on the Magdalene women. Although an official apology has been offered by the Order of the Sisters of Mercy to the women affected by the Magdalene laundries, there has been no acknowledgement by either Catholic Church leadership or the Irish state of the role they, too, played in perpetuating the atrocities of the Magdalene laundries (McKiernan 29; Cullingford 14-15). Further, in having made no compensation specific to the Magdalene women, the Church as a whole has shown that it does not fully assume responsibility.²³

²³ The admission of guilt on the part of the Mercy sisters was the result of the 1996 documentary *Dear Daughter*, which exposed child abuse in the Sisters' Goldenbridge industrial school; the apology was therefore not specific to the Magdalene laundries. In 2004, in a second attempt to apologize for the Church's child abuse, Sister Helena O'Donoghue negotiated a deal between the Irish government, the Sisters of Mercy, and sixteen other Catholic orders: in exchange for donating 128 million euros to a victim compensation scheme (which would later cost taxpayers 1.3 billion euros) the Orders would receive an indemnity from all future legal claims (Cullingford 14-15).

Some secular critics have added to the negative scrutiny of *The Magdalene Sisters*, maintaining that the "popularizing strategies" of stereotype and melodrama "detract" from Mullan's work (Smith, "The Magdalene Sisters" 141). Elizabeth Butler Cullingford argues that the film belongs in the genre of "sexualized anti-Catholic Gothic" (16) and Daniel Eagan believes that Mullan's choice to "blame everything on the Church" is an "easy way out of a far more complicated situation" (39). Eagan further expresses that Mullan "might have taken some real risks by dealing with contemporary problems" (39). However, numerous scholars have argued vehemently against these criticisms, claiming that Mullan actually does create "antagonists with their own vulnerabilities" (Hendrickson 31). Indeed, as I will discuss, many of those same critics who have shown disapproval of the film refute their own arguments by analyzing moments in which characters transcend stereotype.

One common criticism of *The Magdalene Sisters* is that it portrays Sister Brigid and the other nuns as singularly villainous. Richard Blake affirms that Mullan "violate[s] to good effect a fundamental principle of screenwriting by failing to provide contrast for the malice of the villains" and by offering "not one compassionate priest, nun or parent" (qtd. in Murphy 132). Smith also claims that Brigid is "reduced to playing the role of prison warden" ("The Magdalene Sisters" 141). What is notable, though, is that every critic who denounces Mullan's treatment of the nuns also pinpoints a different moment as "the solitary occasion" when we see the nuns as human beings rather than as villains. Smith writes that when Brigid watches *The Bells of St. Mary's* with the penitents and declares her "secret love" for "the fillums [sic]," her sincerity and her pronunciation of

the word "film" humanize the nun and endear her to viewers ("The Magdalene Sisters" 154). Similarly, Crowdus asserts that the nuns are humanized when Brigid has Crispina taken away; the nun is shown "without her usual smiling, supercilious manner" and insomuch demonstrates a "rare moment of weakness" (31). Further, Murphy sees the scene in which the nuns are filmed by the priest, who has to tell them to "act natural" because they are clearly uncomfortable, as one that highlights a particular "spark of humanity" in the nuns (139). That there is variance in opinion about which moment constitutes the one that undoes the villainous portrayal of the nuns suggests that perhaps Mullan's work is not as melodramatic and stereotypical as critics claim. According to what Mullan heard from women who lived in Magdalene laundries, the presence of a "compassionate" nun was actually very rare; one "couldn't afford to be nice in a Magdalene Laundry" (Crowdus 31). Thus, by presenting several scenes in which the nuns are humanized, Mullan actually portrays them in a light that is in point of fact more sympathetic than realistic.

The same narrow interpretations of *The Magdalene Sisters* as cliché and melodramatic also fail to see Mullan's attempt to shed light on present-day issues. Murphy writes that the controversy surrounding the film has often "ignored the distinction between art and reality," which blinds people to much of the insight that it has to offer (133). Cullingford claims that Mullan's "Gothic" film is anti-Catholic because it suggests that the abuse within the laundries could only happen in Ireland, and she argues that "there is nothing essentially Irish about institutionalized misogyny" (33-34). But by describing filmic intricacies that point to issues of the present-day, Cullingford actually

exposes exactly what Mullan was trying to demonstrate through his screenplay: theocracy *anywhere* is a very dangerous thing. When Cullingford compares Bridget's habit to the Muslim burqa (30), she calls to mind contemporary versions of the Magdalene laundries that still exist, and which Mullan himself admits to writing against:

[the film is] critical of theocracy in general, so [people are] quite right to say that there were Protestant Magdalenes. I would take it even further and say there were also Muslim Magdalenes: they called themselves the Taliban. (Crowdus 33)

Ultimately, the film's thinly veiled symbolism illuminates the current injustices of modern-day Magdalenes.

This is not to say that *The Magdalene Sisters* is not also, obviously, an indictment of the specific abuse within Magdalene laundries and other Catholic institutions in the twentieth century. And, based on the Vatican's attempts to prevent people from seeing the film, the Church continues to exert significant influence and power. Brereton writes that up until the 1980's the media often avoided reporting on religious horror stories and taboos because they were considered "extraordinarily hazardous" from a legal point of view and because editors and journalists were reluctant to challenge the prevailing religious orthodoxy (322). Though Brereton asserts that this has largely changed since the 1990's, an anecdote shared by Mullan during an interview sheds light on those censorial strongholds of the Catholic Church that are still in place. When he tried to place an advertisement in *The Irish Independent* for survivors of the Magdalene laundries to contact him before shooting the film, the newspaper refused to allow it (Crowdus 28). It claimed that because the words "survivors" and "Magdalene" appear on a list of key

words that need legal attention, Mullan would need letters from two separate lawyers to explain who he was and what he intended to do with the information he would receive from those who responded to his advertisement. Here, Mullan again holds the Catholic Church to blame; the high costs of legal work, he says, are a deterrent for those who wish to speak out:

[...] I felt [the newspaper's response] was a warning to me. What it told me was, 'Don't shoot the film in Ireland,' because even though the Church has nowhere near the power it used to have, they still have enough to insist on lawyers' letters and stuff like that. (Crowdus 29)

Such "blatant examples of censorship" demonstrate a new kind of abuse on the part of the Catholic Church—namely, condemning to silence those people who have suffered because of the Church's policies, institutions and actions (Crowdus 29).

Though many of the Church's Orders have apologized for the horror they have caused thousands of Irish people, the fact that some of these apologies came only with the condition that Orders be secure from further indemnity speaks of continuing abuse through silence and silencing. Numerous critics have written about the way that silence is perpetuated in this way, so that the family, the state, and the wider community become complicit in the abuse that takes place because they do not speak up against it. Hendrickson (31), McKiernan (32), James (16) and Smith ("The Magdalene Sisters" 141-144) all analyze the silence that permeates the film's opening scene. When Margaret re-enters a wedding banquet after being raped by her cousin, dialogue is hushed.²⁴ The

²⁴ Mullan's explanation of this silent opening scene connects to the ideas of universality and the importance of linking the Irish issues presented with global ones. He claims that in this scene he aimed to show that patriarchal attitudes "transcend language" and that his criticism is applicable to "any institution that singles out women for discrimination" (Crowdus 31).

silent complicity of the family and the members of the community is underscored when it becomes obvious that it is their choice to send Margaret away, despite the fact that she has done nothing wrong. Murphy points out that there is no scene that better demonstrates this silent complicity than the one in which Margaret later finds an unlocked gate at the laundry but chooses not to leave: here, he says, Margaret sees that "the walls of her prison do not just surround the laundry, they surround the consciousness of Irish society, and from that, there is no escape" (142). Mullan comments on the way Irish and Catholic consciousness became intertwined in this regard; the laundries "didn't need people roaming the corridors with guns," he says, because even if the girls had taken it upon themselves to escape "there was simply no place to go" (Crowdus 31).

Thus, criticism of *The Magdalene Sisters* constantly moves beyond specifics toward more general concerns. Families and individual community members who silently watched share blame with the Church, along with the Irish nation, which implicated itself by making the Magdalene laundries exempt from its labour laws (Crowdus 26). Smith points out that the Irish nation took great pride in its purity, and so it did not make sense to object to the "disappearance" of those who displayed "aberrant female sexuality" and therefore threatened to "tarnish" its national identity ("Remembering" 111-113). But an important reason behind such decisions was the enormous power wielded by the Church, which had (and still has) a direct influence on state policy because its conservative values are written into the Irish constitution (Murphy 134). Numerous critics have written about the pervasiveness of Catholicism within the everyday, domestic sphere of *The Magdalene Sisters*—there is the obsessive articulation

of Church rhetoric and ubiquitous Catholic iconography—in order to show how “it is so powerful that it has become imbedded in the psyche of many of the characters” (Murphy 135). Mullan argues that because the rules of the church were so embedded into culture, no one chose to intervene:

[...] very, very few people were willing to go against the power of the Church. It's not just the power of the Church to create a long delay, the power of the Church is that they control your immortal soul. You're not going to go against people with that power.
(Crowds 30)

Although all parties complicit in sending young women to the Magdalene laundries must be held accountable, the power of the Church—behind both the Irish state and the Irish people—ultimately prevented anyone from coming forward about the injustices taking place in the laundries.

Even Cullingford—whose article at times becomes a defence of the Catholic Orders in Ireland and, perhaps more tellingly, also happens to tell one of the rare stories of a *positive* experience in an industrial school—admits that the Church must be held accountable for the Magdalene issue; in turn, she gestures toward a belief that Church ideologies are at the root of this injustice. She points out that the majority of maltreatment claims from Catholic orphanages and reformatories are against Orders that originated in Ireland (10) and concedes that, though “Magdalene asylums were not a peculiarly Irish invention,” the Magdalene system lasted much longer in Ireland than in England or America (12). While in these other countries this system flourished primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the last Irish Magdalene laundry did not close until 1996 (Cullingford 12). But despite her relatively balanced approach to the

Magdalene issue I feel that Cullingford treads dangerous ground in deflecting blame from the Church by claiming that "the sexually repressive agenda of the Catholic Church in Ireland was reinforced by the historical experiences of colonization and famine" (34). True, such historical traumas *did* work together to contribute to the actions of the Church in the twentieth century, but the Church had its own agenda and made choices of its own accord. As an institution that is so invested in human spirituality that its followers feel it controls their immortal souls, there comes a point when the Church must stop pointing fingers and hold itself accountable for its actions. As aforementioned, Cullingford claims that there is nothing "essentially Irish" about "institutionalized misogyny," but since Catholicism—which has clearly demonstrated institutional misogyny—is so pervasive in Irish society, then it is indeed part of understanding of what is "essentially Irish" (34). Therefore, the institutionalized misogyny that Catholicism has perpetuated must remain a part of discourse about Irish identity and freedom for young girls.

The Magdalene Sisters must continue to be included in this discourse because of its healing power. Murphy sees the film as a "social confession box" in which "past traumas are enacted, articulated and re-narrated" so that "sites of cultural repression can be addressed and admitted" (142). Brereton likewise sees the healing power of the film and writes that it "reflect[s] the need to exorcise the past through revisiting the awful experiences" of the laundries, so that Ireland can "begin the therapeutic process of healing within the Church and Irish society generally" (321). While it is evident that the film sheds light on issues of the present day, it is also clear that, as pointed out by Luke

Gibbons, *The Magdalene Sisters* continues to look back in anger because "for those sections of society whose story has not yet been told, the past is still not over" (215).

Perhaps it is because many of the women who look back upon this past have fully entered adulthood that little attention has been given to the child-status of many of the Magdalene inhabitants. Indeed, it is this vulnerable, youthful state that enabled Catholic ideology to become "embedded" in the minds of the Magdalenes in the first place, leaving them trapped not by guards and prison walls, but rather by values absorbed into society (both individual and collective) at all levels—and the silence that permeates these levels when moral boundaries are transgressed. When asked why he feels the Catholic Church has had such an enormous influence, Mullan examines the power of the Church over the immortal soul, but is quick to point out that the Church takes advantage of the malleability of child consciousness by encouraging society to promote Catholic values among the young:

That the Catholic Church could win such subservience from billions of people worldwide is a major [...] political coup. I'm sure there are spin doctors in the Bush administration or the Blair administration who must sit there and think, 'How do they do it? How do they get an entire country to buckle under at the Church's behest?' The answer is because they get them young and, let's say it, the Church is their spiritual homeland. (Crowdus 32)

The implications of this child-state of so many Magdalenes has been left unexplored. In a review of the film, Nicole Armour claims that *The Magdalene Sisters* reveals how "regardless of context, women bear the brunt of religious dogma" (65). In the analysis to follow, I argue that the brunt of this dogma is borne not only by women, but by young girls more particularly. I will examine the ways that the social and religious critique

presented through the film is complicated through the complexity of the four main characters. In addition, I will explore the implications of this narrative strategy, which combines the stories of how these four individual Magdalene girls attempt to achieve agency in order to establish the importance of the collective in acting against injustice.

4.1 Multiple narrative strands

The plot of *The Magdalene Sisters* progresses in a temporally linear fashion, although it tells separate stories of how four different girls come to arrive at the laundry; once the four meet, their stories become intertwined as they affect—and are affected by—one another. The film's social critique is strengthened by these separate stories that eventually come together in a powerful defence of children's rights. Whereas in the other works I have analyzed, female protagonists have been able to exercise certain rights despite their failure to achieve adequate levels of citizenship, the girls in *The Magdalene Sisters* have been completely stripped of any freedom. Not only are they physically incarcerated and forced to work for little to no pay, their treatment is unregulated by the State because it ironically assumes that the Sisters of Mercy, a Catholic and therefore "moral" Order, will not permit the abuse of power. When the laundry's overseers exploit their religious authority, however, they show that in a prison where children's rights are denied, child citizenship remains a pipe dream unless the children act against their oppressor or someone works with them to do so.

The opening scene of *The Magdalene Sisters* tells the story of Margaret's incarceration (she is raped by her cousin while at a wedding céilidh, but when she tells her parents they disown her and banish her to the laundry). Her story is followed by Rose's (after she bears a child out of wedlock, her parents force her to put it up for adoption and send her to the laundry) and then Bernadette's (an orphan under the care of a religious Order who has no one to fight for her rights when she is deemed too fond of flirting with the boys outside her school and sent to the laundry as a "fallen woman").

The linear pattern of these stories is interrupted, however, when we are introduced to the fourth main character, Crispina, whose background we learn in bits and pieces *after* she begins interacting with the other three girls. Through dialogue between Crispina and the other girls, as well as through some careful camera work, her story is unravelled piecemeal throughout the film; she, too, has borne a child out of wedlock, but in the several years she has already spent at the laundry she has also suffered with mental illness and been repeatedly sexually assaulted by the laundry's resident priest. Her simple-minded comments and behaviour, as well as the fact that she seems to consider the priest's assault an inevitable and normal part of life, hint that she may have a mild developmental disability or that her maturation has been stunted. It is telling that the fragmentary presentation of Crispina's story ruptures the established pattern of the film's linear progression because, as I will demonstrate, its end is the most devastating of the four narrative strands in the film. In the next sections I will examine the levels of agency, both individual and collective, that are achieved by the others girls in the film. Subsequently, I will question why Crispina's attempts to reach said agency are undermined. The reason is connected to Mullan's narrative structure within the film: the

frame-by-frame sequential arrangement unfolds in much the same way that the other child characters develop, but Crispina's story is disturbingly presented bit by bit. Her final and ultimately hollow agential actions leave us shocked and perturbed.

4.2 A model of what not to do

The Magdalene Sisters opens with the aforementioned céilidh scene in which Margaret is led to another room and raped by her cousin; she returns in tears and whispers to another cousin about what has happened. We do not hear what she is saying, however, because her words are drowned out by the musical performance of a young priest, who is singing "The Well Below the Valley"—a folk song about incest between a young girl impregnated by her father, brother and uncle. The young girl in the song is sentenced to "seven years a-ringing the bell" and another seven years "burning in hell" for her actions, even though it is hinted that she did not consent to these actions. The song is ironic since its story is similar to what has just happened at the céilidh. The most telling aspect of this song, says James Smith, is the fact that the young woman in it is resigned to her fate, "signif[ying] how Irish culture has absorbed the inevitability" of issues like sexual assault and incest "through such stories that offer no models for possible social action in response" ("The Magdalene Sisters" 142). If this is true, Smith's statement can also be applied to *The Magdalene Sisters* in general because aspects of it, too, show characters similarly resigned to their fates—an idea I will return to later in the chapter. Although *The Magdalene Sisters* does not tell a positive story and in turn becomes a social model

for action, by depicting failed attempts at agency the film does offer a model of what *not* to do. In this, it gestures towards solutions with more potential.

In *The Magdalene Sisters* individual agency falls back upon itself; the film suggests that collective action might work better. The simultaneous presentation of different stories that, although they intersect, do not come together in common agency until the end of the film, hints that if individual acts are combined they might potentially form a pattern of behaviour to contribute to progressive change. In the film, the girls end up damaging themselves and each other through individual acts of agency, which might seem at first to underline agency's futility, since the acts prevent further agency and suppress the girls' potential for future resistance. But because the film demonstrates the importance of the collective through its parallel structuring of the girls' stories, I have reason to believe that the problematics of the individual actions are shown to gesture toward the potential of shared action. The failure inherent in the girls' individual stories—connected through shared violence and imprisonment but at the same time problematically integrated—demonstrates that agency for the Magdalene girls and young girls in Ireland in general needs to be collective and nondestructive in order to achieve a future significantly different from the past.

4.3 Problematic intersections of narratives

Once Margaret, Rose and Bernadette arrive at the laundry, their stories begin to intersect with one another, as well as with the story of Crispina, who has already lived at

the laundry for several years. During their time at the laundry, Margaret and Bernadette in particular learn to use the labour they are obligated to perform—washing other people's dirty laundry, which is symbolic of the pursuit of purity they must carry out—to work the system to their advantage and rebel against their abusers in ways that are not at all moral and pure. Their actions are akin to de Certeau's concept of "perruque," through which the subject finds a way to serve his or her own aims in the very place where the machine he [or she] must serve reigns supreme—namely, the Catholic Church and the society which conforms to its tenets. Unfortunately, the girls' methods are problematic and ultimately fail, though by the end of the film each of the young women manages to achieve a greater level of agency than what they even considered before.

All of Bernadette's attempts to express individuality or achieve agency are quickly suppressed by the nuns at the laundry. Once looked up to by the little girls at the orphanage who competed for the privilege of brushing Bernadette's hair at night, even the smallest vanities are denied by the Sisters of Mercy. In order to hold the penitents' vanity in check, the nuns subject the girls to regular "inspections" in the showers, where they must stand naked in a line while the nuns publicly compare the size of the girls' breasts and the amount of hair on their bodies. And the hard labour performed by the girls in the laundry is not the only way their physicality is exploited; the boys who pick up and drop off the laundry try to get the girls to perform sexual favours for them—since all the girls who work at the laundry are, after all, "hookers and whores" (qtd. in Smith, "The Magdalene Sisters" 145). When a delivery boy named Brendan offers Bernadette two shillings to "suck his cock," Bernadette refuses, but she also sees a way for her work at

the laundry to potentially translate into an opportunity to escape: she sets her mind on attempting to seduce the boy in the short amount of time she is able to spend with him while loading and unloading the trucks.²⁵ One day, Brendan gives his word that he will marry Bernadette and help her escape the laundry, but then one of the nuns catches the two of them in a compromising position: she sees Bernadette holding up her skirt so that Brendan can see what is underneath. The Sisters interpret these actions just as they did Bernadette's earlier flirting: in their eyes, her sexual experimentation is a manifestation of her vanity.

The brutal physical punishment Bernadette receives as a result of her actions speaks to her failure to achieve agency. Sister Brigid beats her until her face is covered in welts and then messily lops off her hair with blunt scissors. Afterwards, she holds a mirror up to Bernadette's face and tells her that, since she is now bloody with her hair in tatters, "she can see [her]self as she really [is]." When, in this instant, the camera cuts to a close-up of Bernadette's blood-coated eye, however, it is not Bernadette's reflection that captures the audience's attention, but rather the silhouette of the nun as it is reflected in the mirror and then in Bernadette's pupil. Murphy has written that this scene suggests that the audience is "not seeing Bernadette as she really is, but [rather] a brutal physical manifestation of how [Sister] Brigid truly sees her" (137). I argue, however, that the nun's silhouette is visible to us and to Bernadette because in that moment it becomes

²⁵ Of course, it is unfortunate that the only tools of agency available to Bernadette are her body, but it remains commendable that she is able to recognize agential opportunities when they are presented. It is notable that she might have had much more social currency with which to negotiate had she worked with the other girls in order to come up with an escape plan. But, then again, it is possible that Bernadette is actually romantically interested in Brendan for herself. Perhaps she wants to be with him as much as she wants to escape; certainly, we are not given any reason to think otherwise.

obvious that there are aspects of Brigid's personality in Bernadette's own character. As easy as it is to be sympathetic to the wounded Bernadette in this moment, like Brigid, she also exhibits cruelty to those around her. Though she by no means deserves the punishment she receives, Bernadette is not completely blameless. When Crispina loses her St. Christopher medal, she is absolutely frenzied because she is convinced it is a "holy telephone" through which she can converse with her estranged son. Bernadette finds the necklace, but waits until well after everyone has been searching frantically for it before she gives it back. Her onscreen actions appear malicious because the intent behind these actions is not made clear. Thus, despite her brave actions, because she allows Crispina to suffer when she has the ability to help her, Bernadette's moral character as a victim is diminished. Her actions exhibit that in a prison where the female sex is "strategically divided against itself" (Cullingford 22) through the power differentials between nun and penitent, Bernadette has perpetuated the pattern by acting cruelly to Crispina and thus dividing herself from her. Whereas collective actions of agency tend to be more successful, Bernadette has isolated herself in her attempts to achieve freedom.

Through the filmic technique that shows Brigid's silhouette reflected in Bernadette's pupil, Mullan hints at the similarities between the two women and offers insight into why Bernadette's attempt to achieve "perruque" fail; Margaret, too, performs an act of perruque, though unlike Bernadette she performs her rebellious act on behalf of a friend rather than for herself. Margaret establishes herself early as Crispina's protector; when Crispina's St. Christopher medal is lost, Margaret leads the search for it throughout the laundry. She also exhibits the most anger of all the other girls when she learns that

Bernadette has been hiding it all along. So, when Margaret sees Father Fitzroy forcing Crispina to perform fellatio, she instantly assumes the role of advocate and guardian for her friend. Outraged, she devises a plan to launder Fitzroy's Corpus Christi robes with poison ivy, so that he will embarrass himself with endless scratching during the ceremony. However, Margaret's scheme backfires. Though Fitzroy does eventually disgrace himself by removing all his clothing in a paroxysm of scratching, Crispina also winds up humiliated when she cannot help endlessly scratching the insides of her thighs during the ceremony: unbeknownst to Margaret, Fitzroy manages to assault Crispina again, before performing the ceremonial mass, and so his clothing has come in contact with Crispina's skin, as well as his own. The ceremony's congregation therefore become suspicious when Fitzroy and Crispina are the only people in the room who have been affected by the itch. And, in light of the reasons behind Crispina's presence in the laundry and the fact that both she and the priest are scratching private areas of their bodies, it is probable that these people have concluded that there is a sexual connection between the mutual itching—though it is equally likely that this assumption wrongfully presupposes consent, or even seduction, on the part of Crispina. Margaret's mutinous act, meant to accomplish revenge, thus ends up harming Crispina instead of helping her.

This harm to Crispina only gets worse as the scene progresses. Fitzroy runs away after he humiliates himself by tearing off his clothing and Crispina, feeling confident as a result of Margaret's insubordination, screams after him in an attempt to expose his betrayal of the vow of chastity. Having listened carefully to what Margaret told her earlier—after she learns about Fitzroy's abuse, she tells Crispina that "he is not a man of

God"—Crispina repeats the phrase over and over, yelling out so that both the priest and the entire congregation will understand: "You are *not* a man of God!" She repeats the phrase slowly and loudly twenty-five times in what feels like a never-ending extension of the scene. No one speaks up or stops her, and the outburst is never again acknowledged onscreen. All we see afterwards is the cold consequence of her actions: without looking into the circumstances behind Crispina's fit of temper—presumably because she does not want to acknowledge what she knows she will find—Brigid arranges to have Crispina transferred to an institution for the insane. Once there, Crispina becomes increasingly ill; onscreen subtitles describe the details of her death by anorexia while the camera depicts her last days in a solitary confinement cell, where she senselessly traces the cracks in the wall and sticks her fingers down her throat. Margaret's vengeful deed, incited by the empathy she feels for Crispina, has deadly repercussions.

It must be noted that although Margaret and Crispina are influenced by each other and rebel in the same scene, they do so with contrasting intentions and objectives. Crispina, simple-minded and idealistic, wants her actions to put an end to the injustice that has been done to her, but Margaret's handiwork is more a result of her desire for revenge than her need to be free. Having been disowned and brought to the laundry by her family, Margaret is resigned to her fate and has given up hope of ever leaving the laundry. Her acquiescence becomes evident when, long before she rebels, she finds herself alone one day in the laundry's toolshed, from which she spies an unlocked gate that opens onto a road bordering the hillside. Suddenly terrified by the possibility of an outside world that will likely condemn her if it learns her story, she approaches the road

cautiously. When a car stops and offers her a ride, she refuses and returns to the laundry; there, at least, she knows what sort of treatment to expect. This profoundly disturbing scene gestures towards the deeper politics at work in the minds of those both within and outside of the laundry's walls. The Catholic doctrines that paint the Magdalene girls as "fallen women" are not only accepted without question by those outside the laundry; the girls themselves are convinced of their inadequacy.

This idea that the Magdalene girls have accepted and internalized negative public attitudes about them connects back to Smith's comment that "The Well Below the Valley" underlines how Ireland has accepted the inevitability of certain issues. But Margaret's moment of defiance at the time of her eventual escape from the laundry shows that she has *not* actually accepted her incarceration as a given. Her actions undo those preconceptions about her resignation that are formed in the scene where she gazes longingly through the laundry's garden gate. In her final escape scene, she demonstrates the potential agency that can occur even individually when young girls have the support they need. When her brother arrives at the laundry, the two stealthily creep down a corridor, hoping that the commotion of Christmas festivities will help them leave the premises unnoticed. Sister Brigid appears around a corner with the Archbishop and two visitors, and it becomes apparent that they will have to stand to the side and pretend they are on their way somewhere else within the convent. At the last moment, however, Margaret makes the snap decision to stand up to Sister Brigid once and for all, stepping in front of the party and shockingly asking the nun to let her pass. Brigid laughs, and says,

You'd better be joking, girl. Because if I thought for a second you would expect one of the persons here to step aside for the likes of you, then brother or no brother, I would punish this insolence most severely, most severely.

Margaret stands her ground, and Brigid nonchalantly remarks that Margaret's refusal to move must mean that she will remain to endure said discipline. Margaret drops to her knees as if to beg Brigid's forgiveness, but then shocks the audience once again with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer—thus, answering Brigid's authority with that of a higher power. So as not to interrupt the prayer, the party is forced to move past Margaret, who seems to have struck the final blow. What seems at first glance to be a reconsolidation of institutional power structures, actually undermines them. With her brother by her side, Margaret gains the confidence she needs to defy the authority of those who have used abuse to remain in power.

Thus, after her failed attempt at agency during the Corpus Christi scene, Margaret learns that with the help of another she can embrace the freedom she has been denied; unfortunately, Crispina continues to act alone and her subsequent small acts of rebellion rob her of her life. Her death—which, since it occurs shortly after her commission to the asylum, can ultimately be linked back to the outburst that brought her there—is politically powerful. Crispina's anorexia becomes a way for her to fight back and commit her final act of puerque: her self-destruction is agential because it underlines her final, supreme refusal to submit her body to exploitation. Having been sexually abused by Father Fitzroy, Crispina fights back by starving her body until it is no longer useful so that she never has to endure the pain of sexual abuse again. In order to show that she refuses to submit her body to abuse by others she has resorted to damaging it herself.

Crispina's death makes manifest the limits of her individual capacity to perform an act of agency that works to her advantage. In the end, her perruque serves her aims instead of the aims of the de Certeauian "machine," but she has to *die* in order to achieve these aims. By destroying her body in an attempt to demonstrate agency, Crispina underlines the futility of this agency. But the fatal consequences of her revolt also transform her into a martyr for the cause of social justice for young girls who have been abused by Orders of the Church. Her martyrdom exposes the unfairness of her circumstances, especially since all three of her friends manage to escape from the laundry and thus achieve at least a small degree of autonomy. Even though they have all previously tried and failed to gain independence, by the end there is still hope for them.

A fundamental aspect of the other girls' escape is that none of them acts alone: in each case, they need the assistance of others in order to be successful. As aforementioned, Margaret gains courage to stand up to Brigid in the presence of her brother. Bernadette and Rose escape together, realizing in the end that getting away unnoticed is much easier than either of them expected. Crispina, on the other hand, remains alone in her defiance. Her story, which is the note on which the film ends, strengthens the argument made by the other individual acts of agency in the film: taking action against injustice involves a high level of risk, particularly when acting alone. Although the stories of the other three protagonists in the film have come together so that in collectivity they establish a foundation for their escape, Crispina's story deviates away from the other girls' when she is sent to the asylum. Once there, she is forced to act in isolation. Just as her story has been detached from those of the other girls from the very

beginning of the film—the details of her life have been revealed in snippets, unlike the clear linear exposure of the other girls' pasts—at the end of the film, she remains sequestered so that when she rebels, she ends up literally destroying herself in the process. Crispina's solitary confinement at the time of her death upholds the idea that children are too often excluded from the process of making the decisions that affect their lives.²⁶

It is important to note that Crispina holds the politically powerful position of martyr. In sacrificing her life, she reinforces Mullan's call to end injustice against children and in turn ensure their rights to freedom and citizenship. But the martyr is only powerful because of the *potential* future change it *might* inspire. *The Magdalene Sisters* hints that the collective is less risky and therefore holds more weight for the present. In both life and death, Crispina highlights that the collective is more effective than the individual. Thus, in separating Crispina's story through his narrative technique, Mullan emphasizes that any conception of agency that is disconnected from the collective is ineffective. This moral directive transforms the film into a social model for change.

²⁶ Her isolation also connects back to her agency throughout the film, which all occur independently.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

On the 8th of July, 2001, the Government of Ireland replaced the United Kingdom's Children Act of 1908 with a new Children Act in order "to make further provision in relation to the care, protection and control of children"—children defined as a group encompassing every person in the Republic under the age of eighteen ("Children Act 2001"). The revision of the original Act was meant to "provide for related matters" that had arisen over the course of the twentieth century ("Children Act 2001")—some of which are addressed in the Ryan Report, published in May 2009 (The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse). However, a sustained examination of the lost girls in *The Snapper*, *Down by the River* and *The Magdalene Sisters* shows that despite the changes enacted by new legislation and commissions assembled to investigate violations of children's rights, as well as the strides that are currently being made in women's rights through *A.B. & C. v Ireland*, young Irish girls are still not permitted the level of citizenship to which they are entitled. In their introduction to *Wild Colonial Girl: Essays on Edna O'Brien*, Lisa Colletta and Maureen O'Connor reflect on the similar failure of the Republic to provide equal rights for women:

Connolly, who was militant not only in his Irish nationalism, but in his socialism and feminism, envisioned a nation that would reject the social and sexual inequities that had defined and supported the despotism of British colonial rule. The Irish Free State, however, reproduced all of its previous master's oppressive structures, its technologies of control and prohibition. The exercise of power in independent Ireland has continued to be patriarchal and exclusionary. (7)

Thus, in the twentieth century, Ireland failed in its duty to uphold women's rights. The texts studied here demonstrate this failure, while also representing the deterioration of the vow made in the 1916 Proclamation, which pledged to "cherish" all its children equally.

It is not easy to determine who exactly fits into this "children" category. Even though "children" are defined by Ireland's Children Act of 2001 as every person in the Republic under the age of eighteen, the narratives studied here show that childhood is defined by much more than age. In *The Snapper*, Sharon is actually twenty years old, although her emotional immaturity and her level of dependence indicate that she still has profoundly childish instincts. On the other hand, Mary MacNamara is thirteen and therefore fits into the child category. Age is not revealed at all in *The Magdalene Sisters*, but it is clear that many of the young girls are under the care of adults before they arrive at the laundry. Thus, taken together the texts reflect the arbitrariness of age as a means of indicating maturity, experience, or citizenship.

When it comes to assessing levels of maturity, children must depend on the discretion of the adults around them. The risk of such dependency becomes clear when children (already in an ambiguous position) find themselves in precarious circumstances, such as when they become pregnant. *The Snapper* reflects the anxiety embodied by the in-between position of children who have children in contemporary Ireland. Sharon's uncertain state demonstrates the ambiguity of theories of citizenship for young girls. Since she is twenty years old, she cannot be considered a child. Further, even if national laws and theories of citizenship were flexible enough to accommodate this age discrepancy, Sharon chooses not to exercise her rights to citizenship. Her silence

indicates that the process of child citizenship is flawed.

However, the adaptation of the X case from fact to fiction in *Down by the River* demonstrates the potential for forward movement in the arena of children's citizenship, and *The Magdalene Sisters* shows how this change can be enacted through collective action. Both narratives underline the empathy and understanding involved in fiction. By teasing out potential scenarios that might lead to a questioning of social ideas, they exhibit the empathy that must be practiced by adults in order to allow girls to adopt a role in the decisions that affect them. It is only through collective action, among and between adults and children, that child citizenship could be successful.

Taken together all three texts provide a way to imagine how current approaches to child citizenship might actually lead to active citizenship for young girls. *The Snapper*, *Down by the River* and *The Magdalene Sisters* indicate that girls must be respected as human beings—not simply as individuals under the care of their parents or as wards of the state. Even though girls need care and protection and often have not developed the emotional or intellectual capacity to reason about citizenship, their status needs to be recognized and they need to be included in these discussions; that is, if they choose to participate. Even when they remain silent, they need to be made aware that they can have input into what happens in their lives.

Despite the fact that the narratives explored here provide a space to analyze teenage pregnancy more comprehensively than Jans's theory, interpreting them still requires flexibility. The texts leave many "what-ifs" unexplored. Just as theories and

laws are only as effective as those who make sense of them, the impact of these narratives on child citizenship is at the discretion of those readers who interpret the texts. Therefore and perhaps unfortunately, the works studied here also suggest that until child citizenship in Ireland goes beyond imagined possibility and becomes an actual reality, the nation's young girls will continue to lead precarious lives.

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