

The Magdalene Sisters (2002) ^[1]

By: Darby, Alexis Keywords: Catholic Church ^[2] Magdalene Laundries ^[3]

In 2002, Miramax Entertainment released *The Magdalene Sisters*, a film that portrays an interpretation of the true events experienced by four young women who were forcibly placed into a Magdalene asylum in Dublin, Ireland, in 1964. Catholic nuns ran Magdalene asylums throughout the world, where they forced women whom society deemed sexually promiscuous to perform hard labor in their laundry facilities. The film portrays the experiences of four women, Margaret, Bernadette, Rose, and Crispina, as they experienced negative treatment from the nuns and sought escape. Directed by Peter Mullan, *The Magdalene Sisters* provided a means to see how women, including unwed mothers, prostitutes, and those with disabilities, were affected by Magdalene laundries in Ireland.

When it was released in 2002, *The Magdalene Sisters* was one of the first forays into the topic of Magdalene laundries. The film's director, Mullan, sought to portray what life was like in Magdalene asylums, or Magdalene laundries, in Ireland. Mullan based the film on accounts he received from survivors. Mullan, a former Catholic, stated in a later interview that his primary motivation for creating the film was to provide closure and recognition for the asylums' victims. Mullan began working on the film after viewing the 1998 documentary, *Sex in a Cold Climate*, which was one of the first films that focused on the asylums' victims. Producer Steve Humphries released *Sex in a Cold Climate* worldwide after finding four victims who were willing to share their experiences at a similar asylum to the one represented in *The Magdalene Sisters*. After the release of *Sex in a Cold Climate*, more victims began speaking out about the cruelties they faced in the asylums. Mullan based *The Magdalene Sisters* around the accounts given by those women.

The Catholic Church sponsored Magdalene laundries, which were reform institutions for women. The Magdalene laundries tended to be laundering facilities, where women whom the Church sought to improve worked. Initially, the Magdalene laundries were designed to reform prostitutes. Later, the laundries housed unwed mothers and women with disabilities. Magdalene laundries existed throughout Europe, North America, and Australia. The Magdalene laundry likely referenced in *The Magdalene Sisters* was found to have had a mass grave of over seven hundred infant and child skeletons.

The Magdalene Sisters opens with three scenes that show how three of the main characters, Margaret, Bernadette, and Rose, came to the Magdalene asylum when they were teenagers. The first scene occurs in rural Dublin, Ireland, in 1964 and begins by displaying the name Margaret. The scene then cuts to a wedding reception, where a band is playing traditional Irish music. A boy, Kevin, grabs Margaret's arm and pulls her off screen, away from the noise of the wedding party. In this first scene of the film, Margaret is still a child. Kevin pulls Margaret into an abandoned room and begins kissing her. Margaret pulls away, stating that she is his cousin and that kissing her is wrong. Kevin proceeds to hit Margaret in the face and then rapes her. Margaret escapes from the room after Kevin leaves, and confides in one of the wedding guests. Within minutes, the men at the wedding know what happened and begin

glaring at Margaret. The next day, Margaret's father informs her that she is going away and puts her in a car that takes her to a Magdalene asylum.

Bernadette is introduced in the next scene, which begins with two young girls waking Bernadette up from her sleep asking to borrow her hairbrush. They are at an orphanage. One of the young girls asks Bernadette if it is a sin to be as beautiful as she is, to which Bernadette responds that the virgin Mary was beautiful and never sinned. As the film continues, the girls are shown outside where Bernadette begins flirting with boys not from the orphanage. The film shows the orphanage headmaster watching from a window. The next day, the two young girls ask Bernadette for her brush again, but find that she is gone and left her belongings behind, implying that Bernadette was sent to a Magdalene asylum.

The film then introduces the last main character, Rose, immediately after she has delivered her infant. In the film, Rose's mother refuses to look at the infant. Rose tells her that she knows that having a child out of wedlock is sinful, but that her son is innocent. In the following scene, Rose's father calls her outside the birthing room and sits her down with a man from an orphanage, who talks her into signing a document that places the infant's care with the orphanage. As the scene continues, Rose realizes she does not want to give up her infant and she starts yelling at the man to give her son back. Her father forcibly holds her away from the man so that he can remove the infant from the room. The scene ends with Rose crying over the loss of her newborn as her parents walk away from her. The film then cuts to the title page reading *The Magdalene Sisters*, which is offset by a background of the names of women who were sent to the asylums.

In the next scene, a nun in a traditional black habit leads the three girls into the gated asylum. Margaret, Bernadette, and Rose follow the nun down a hallway where other girls and women are scrubbing the floors and walls. As the film continues, the nun takes them into the study of Sister Bridgit, the head nun, who explains why the girls are at the asylum. Sister Bridgit begins to describe the philosophy of the asylum, stating that, through the power of prayers, godliness, and hard work, Margaret, Bernadette, and Rose will find their way back to Jesus Christ. Sister Bridgit also tells them her interpretation of the story of Mary Magdalene, a biblical prostitute, whom the nuns have designed the asylums to embody. Sister Bridgit calls Magdalene a sinner of the worst kind, who only received forgiveness for selling sexual acts for money by depriving herself of all worldly pleasures including food and sleep. The nun continues to say that Magdalene worked beyond human ability to have her sins forgiven, and that Margaret, Bernadette, and Rose would be doing the same if they had any hopes of getting into heaven. As the scene ends, Sister Bridgit tells them that through laundering clothes, the main role for the women at the asylum, they would cleanse their souls.

In the film's next scene, Margaret, Bernadette, and Rose are given their uniforms and shown what daily life looks like at the asylum. Each wears a matching uniform and is assigned a housing unit with girls around the same age, eighteen years old. The film shows other housing units made up of much older women. As portrayed in the film, the women slept in sleeping dormitories with twelve beds. At night, when the girls were required to change into their sleeping clothes, they changed underneath their jackets and with their backs turned to one another to maintain their modesty. The nuns watched to ensure they changed correctly. In the following scene, the girls spend their first night at the asylum. During the night, Rose gets out of bed crying and runs to the bathroom. Bernadette follows her and realizes that Rose is in pain because her breasts are engorged. Because Rose was not able to breastfeed her infant, she was not able to let out her milk supply. Another woman comes in and advises them to be

quiet and for Rose to deal with the pain. That woman warns that the nuns would inflict worse pain if they found out she was out of bed.

Another woman living at the asylum, Crispina, is introduced in a scene about the girls' work in the laundry. In the scene, Crispina advises Bernadette that the easiest way to get menstrual blood out of clothes is to soak them in cold water, scrub them with salt on your hands, and then rinse them with hot water. Later, Rose bonds with Crispina after finding out she has a two-year-old son. Crispina tells Rose that she communicates with her son through a St. Christopher necklace she wears around her neck. As the film continues, it is implied that Crispina has a cognitive disability.

The film makes it clear in the next scene that Bernadette does not want to be at the Magdalene asylum. After meeting a delivery boy for the laundry drop off, Bernadette believes she has found a way to escape. As she explains in the next scene, she thinks that if she has sex with the delivery boy, he would have to marry her, and then she could leave the asylum. The film shows the two having sex behind a storage building. Afterwards, the boy declines her offer of marriage and says that the sex was meaningless. In an effort to get him to change his mind, she lifts up her dress and shows him her genitals. He changes his mind, and says he will bring a key to open the front door and arrive that night to pick her up. As the film shows, that night, Bernadette sneaks out of the dormitory and runs down the hallways to get to the front door. Just as she reaches the door, he locks it and says it was all a mistake and that she is just a whore. Bernadette is then caught by the nuns who heard her running through the halls. They force her to Sister Bridgit's study, hold her down, and cut off her hair. They also cut her face and ask her if she will reach salvation now that she has lost her beauty.

As the film continues, scenes proceed showing the passage of time. The girls' routine solidifies, and they work without complaining. They witness the nuns eating meat and bread for every meal, while they have oatmeal. During the montage, a scene shows Sister Bridgit counting and hiding money in a cookie tin in her study. Sister Bridgit also has a photo of former US president, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, by her desk.

In the next scene of *The Magdalene Sisters*, the nuns are abusing the women at the asylum. The nuns line up the girls naked in the bathroom and begin insulting and joking about their bodies. They compare the girls' breasts, nipples, butts, and pubic hair. The nuns give awards to the women who have the largest breasts and butts. They then have Bernadette and Crispina stand very close to one another to compare their pubic hair. The film shows Crispina crying after receiving the award for longest pubic hair.

Crispina comes down with the flu in one of the next scenes. Margaret takes her to sleep in the dormitory. Crispina leaves behind her St. Christopher necklace at breakfast, which Bernadette steals, and Crispina gets upset when she later realizes she has lost it. Margaret promises her that she will find the necklace for her. Later that night, Margaret finds Crispina attempting to hang herself in the bathroom. The scene shows four of the girls getting her down from the noose she tied out of her bed sheets.

Following the scene that documented Crispina's suicide attempt, Margaret passes one of the huts on the asylum's property on her way to a church service and sees Crispina giving oral sex to one of the priests. Margaret runs to rejoin the group and enters the chapel. That same priest then comes to deliver the sermon while Crispina sneaks in behind him. Later that day, Margaret collects poison ivy and washes the priest's clothes with the plant. In the next scene,

a week later, the girls and women of the asylum are led outside to listen to another sermon. As the same priest begins, he itches incessantly. As the scene continues, the priest removes all of his clothing and runs naked across the field with welts on his skin. Crispina stands and lifts up her dress to show the nuns that she too has the welts, but only on her inner thighs. The nuns tell her to sit down and be quiet out of fear that the other people in attendance will discover the priest has assaulted her. Crispina shouts across the field to the priest that he is not a man of god, over twenty-four times. Later that night, the film shows Crispina removed from the asylum and taken to a different home for people with mental illness.

Next, the film shows Margaret escaping the asylum on Christmas day. The scene opens with one orange placed on each of the girls' beds. Margaret's brother comes in to the asylum and demands that he receive custody of his sister. Margaret yells at him, asking why he waited four years to come [rescue](#) [4] her. Sister Bridgit threatens to keep Margaret in the asylum for the rest of her life, but eventually, Margaret and her brother escape.

Bernadette and Rose conspire to get out of the asylum in the next scene. Rose saw Crispina's sister and son earlier in the day through a gate and ran to tell them that Crispina had been sent to a mental institution over a year prior. One of the nuns drags Rose to Sister Bridgit's study, where Rose is beaten with a belt until she bleeds. That night, Bernadette and Rose decide to escape. They break down the padlocked door to their dormitory with one of their bedframes. They run to Sister Bridgit's study, where they look for the key to the front door. Once Bernadette finds it, Sister Bridgit enters the study and threatens to kill them if they try to leave. Bernadette grabs a pair of scissors and holds them to Bridgit's throat until she lets them leave. In the next scene, Bernadette and Rose run down the hall with the key as two other nuns chase after them. Bernadette swings a candelabrum at the women until they stop chasing them. The two girls escape the asylum and run to a local town.

The film shows Bernadette and Rose after they escaped meeting a hairstylist who takes them in, gives them clothing and money, and helps them get a new start. Rose gets on a bus for Liverpool, England, and Bernadette stays behind to train as a hairstylist. At the end of *The Magdalene Sisters*, there are four short clips before the credits that detail what happened to the women after they escaped the asylum. The viewer learns that Bernadette moved to Scotland, where she opened her own salon. She was married and divorced three times. The viewer also learns that Rose married and had two daughters. She found her son in 1996, thirty-three years after he was taken away from her. She remained a devout Catholic until her death in 1998. The film then indicates that Margaret became a primary school teacher and later a headmistress. She never married or had children. According to the final clip, Crispina developed the eating disorders bulimia and anorexia. She died due to her illnesses in 1971 at twenty-four years old. The credits mention that Crispina's given name was Harriet. The final screen before the credits mentions that over 30,000 women were detained in similar laundries throughout Ireland until the last Magdalene asylum in Ireland closed in 1996.

The Magdalene Sisters received a surplus of criticism from the Catholic Church after its release. According to journalist Fiachra Gibbons, the Vatican directly stated its dismay that such a biased film was put out to condemn the Catholic Church. However, survivors of the asylums argued that Mullan's depiction of the nuns was inaccurate, and that they were more abusive than he made them out to be in his film. *The Magdalene Sisters* was entered into the Venice Film Festival in 2002, where it won the festival's highest honor, the Golden Lion Award. However, one of the film festival's directors announced his dismay that the film received the award, proceeding to call the film a propaganda film comparable to those

produced by Nazis. Along with *Sex in a Cold Climate*, *The Magdalene Sisters* showed an interpretation of how women in Magdalene asylums were treated in the 1900s.

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Publisher

Arizona State University. School of Life Sciences. Center for Biology and Society. Embryo Project Encyclopedia.

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Last Modified

Wednesday, July 4, 2018 - 04:40

DC Date

2018-06-01

DC Date Accessioned

Monday, June 4, 2018 - 22:23

DC Date Available

Monday, June 4, 2018 - 22:23

DC Date Created

2018-06-01

DC Date Created Standard

Friday, June 1, 2018 - 07:00

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