

Performing feminist empathy in Claire Keegan's *Small Things like These* (2021): from affective encounters to (cruel) optimism

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ABSTRACT

This article dwells on Sarah Ahmed's notion of "affective relationality" and her suggestion that empathy involves the subject's reaction to the pain of others and willingness to be affected by it. Such postulates are used to explore *Small Things like These* (2021), the latest novel by the acclaimed Irish writer Claire Keegan. I contend that the book contributes significantly to demand an imperative culture of feminist empathy towards former inmates of the Magdalen Laundries system in Ireland and their ongoing predicaments. This is achieved through the protagonist's constant uneasiness for how responding proactively to injustice and to the suffering of the Magdalen Other may destabilise his own well-being and that of his family. Ireland's culture of empathy is, thus, sharply cross-examined by means of a critique of the many fallacies of the moral order against which the story is projected. My analysis focuses on the complexity of affects addressed in the text, where interpersonal encounters and intersubjective identification between the empathetic subject and the object of empathy are foregrounded as relevant for the achievement of a more ethically sustainable society that transcends the temporal framework of the novel.

KEYWORDS

Empathy; affect; social justice; Ireland's Magdalen Laundries; Claire Keegan

Introduction

The "affective turn" claimed by contemporary feminist thinkers like Sarah Ahmed (2004; 2010), Lauren Berlant (2004; 2011) and Carolyn Pedwell (2012) can be brought to bear on one of the most poignant episodes of Ireland's recent history: the scandals around the infamous Magdalen Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes. These centres were part of the so-called "architecture of containment" (Smith 2007), which scapegoated unmarried mothers and other women deemed socially "deviant" through coerced confinement and the application of a regime of forced labour and violence in Church-run institutions.¹ In the past three decades, a wide array of memoirs, scholarly works, audio-visual

productions and literary texts have uncovered the long-hidden details of such infrastructure of repression, also appealing directly to the nation's sensitivity and conscience.² Dwelling on Ahmed's postulates about "affective relationality" in her seminal work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) and her understanding of empathy as involving the subject's reaction to the pain of others and willingness to be affected by it, this article explores *Small Things like These* (2021), the latest novel by the acclaimed Irish writer Claire Keegan. On the pages that follow, I will try to unpack whether the book demands an imperative culture of feminist empathy towards former inmates of the system and their ongoing predicaments, epitomising or not the process whereby Magdalen narratives have gained ground in the past three decades. Namely, I contend that this body of texts has escalated in point and tone from initial revelation to later problematisation, and ultimately, in more recent years, to incisive emotional interpellations to the Irish population for reacting empathically in favour of the full reparation of damages caused to the victims and the achievement of social justice. In this respect, I agree with the scholarly appreciation of Magdalen productions as having "instigated and contributed to the process of memory" in order "to fill in the blanks of history" (Sebbane 2021, 52), as well as being "an important element in the processing and understanding of historical traumas" (Pine 2011, 25). However, such a process has reached a more affect-oriented momentum of late, when the persistent lack of full recognition of the institutional survivors' rights on the part of the Church, the State and the Irish society has compelled a shift towards intersubjective identification and a call for ethical duty.

It is particularly around this affect-based engagement to respond significantly to the Magdalen phenomenon that Keegan has articulated the story narrated in *Small Things like These*, which was one of the six texts shortlisted for the 2022 Booker Prize. Set in the Irish town of New Ross in the days before Christmas 1985, the action follows Bill

Furlong, a modest coal merchant with a wife and five daughters, throughout his existential dilemma between keeping his life of reasonable privilege, stability and social respect or succouring Sarah, one of the inmates of the local “training school” for girls that he meets when she is desperately seeking assistance to escape the convent. Keegan describes the ethical crisis to which Furlong is precipitated, as his growing empathy towards the hopeless magdalen crystallises in a self-demand to release her from the convent incarceration. Given her narrative emphasis on the protagonist’s uneasiness for how responding proactively to injustice and to the suffering of others may destabilise his own well-being and that of his family, I argue that Keegan foregrounds, on the one hand, the continuum of ostracisation that the victims of Ireland’s institutional system conveyed, since incorporating a former magdalen to the family would bring for Furlong serious economic but mostly reputational effects. On the other hand, the author interrogates the relation between the ethics of empathy and presumed Christian values also addressed in the novel, like compassion and mercy for vulnerable individuals. Accordingly, she insists on the complexity of affects, whereby indignation, indecision and fear can be direct results of empathy, thus attesting to its dynamism and its procedural dimension, which are aligned with the conditions of interpersonal encounters and the degree of intersubjective identification between the empathetic subject and the object of empathy.

The way in which Furlong’s anxieties curb his intervention in favour of Sarah and question the levels of empathy manifested in 1980s Ireland can be interpreted in light of Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism.” For the American thinker optimism stands as “the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying something that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project concept or scene” (2011, 1-2). Berlant sustains, however, that this sense of possibility for change can be “cruel” when the very object of

optimism impedes the subject's own flourishing, or when it "actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving" (2011, 2). Similarly, Ahmed's proposal about the effects of happiness, seen as the promise that has largely determined our life choices, and her accent on the oppression inherent to the traditional ethics of "the good life" also come in useful for the purposes of my study of *Small Things like These*. With Ahmed, I believe in "the unhappy effects of happiness" (2010, 2), which has been historically attributed to certain objects, circumstances or ideals, whereas there are other equally valuable modes of happiness that do not comply with such "fantasy" (2010, 11). These postulates by both Ahmed and Berlant will be employed in an attempt to determine if the relational dynamics described by them apply to the empathic interactions experienced by Furlong. To this aim, I will start by describing the way in which, firstly, his affinity springs from a growing relationality towards Sarah's plight and then, empathy is boosted by the cruel indifference of the agents of morality, represented by his immediate community, the religious order and his own wife. In the final section of the article, I will examine the terms whereby the factual exercise of empathy is negotiated in the novel, and the circular effects that reinscribing happiness may have upon both the subject and the object. All these critical viewpoints, as I will also try to demonstrate, transcend the temporal framework of the novel by appealing directly to the contemporary reader, whose movement out of our comfort zone and empathic challenge to the Magdalen ideological tenets and social practices are invoked through this gripping story.

Affective encounters

In her review of *Small Things like These* and commenting on its rural setting, Lydia Millet observes that “the scope of village life may be small, but its texture is rich. Neighbors are welcoming. Customers give Furlong gifts” and there are also significant “moments of interpersonal contact” (2021, np). However, she also sharply notices that “beneath the charming give-and-take lurk steely warnings and a sociopathic lack of empathy” and “the town allows vicious crimes, against its most vulnerable residents, to go on unobstructed” (2021, np). This contradictory social interconnection within the microcosm of the small town certainly underlies Keegan’s text, which forges new paths in the debates about the collective responsibility of Irish society for not only silencing the terror regime inside the Magdalen Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes, but most importantly, for perpetuating processes of Othering and disregard of the inmates’ plight. As implied in the social gatherings described in the novel, everybody in New Ross knew and gossiped about the institution,³ but there was a wide consensus to keep these “outcasts” at bay. In an interview for the Booker Prize Foundation, Keegan admitted having been appalled by the widespread inaction about the magdalens:

I wasn’t deliberately setting out to write about misogyny or Catholic Ireland or economic hardship or fatherhood or anything universal, but I did want to answer back to the question of why so many people said and did little or nothing knowing that girls and women were incarcerated and forced to labour in these institutions. (Keegan 2022)

To this aim, one of the author’s most accurate choices is the temporal contextualisation of the story in the 1980s, which sets the scene within one of the bleakest decades in recent Irish history, while also allowing for a contemporary examination of whether that status quo has changed or not since then.⁴ As evidenced through references to “the dole queue,” “children’s allowances,” mass migration and redundancies in

shipyard companies (2021, 13-15), the 1980s was unequivocally a hard period for Ireland's economy. In their introduction to *Irish Women's Writing and Culture under Austerity* (2022), Deirdre Flynn and Ciara L. Murphy sustain that the economic factors and austerity measures taken at that time strongly impacted the country, and they ground the literary responses written by women from that decade to the present. Thus, since this period of difficulty and recession, Irish women writers have been "exposing and acknowledging the scandals emerging throughout this time. [...] The move towards globalisation during this time and away from an inward-looking sense of nationhood from the 1990s encouraged a move away from a culture of silence and towards a culture of silence-breaking" (2022, 6). In Keegan's novel, this socio-economic background contributes as well to the protagonist's characterisation. The downturn of Ireland's capitalist system is predicated on the introduction of Furlong in the first two chapters, where along with his financial struggle to maintain a decent job and reasonable living standards, he appears as practical in his relation with other fellow villagers. The narrator makes clear that "The times were raw but Furlong felt all the more determined to carry on, to keep his head down and stay on the right side of people, to keep providing for his girls and see them getting on" (2021, 14).

As the story progresses, however, such moral pragmatism gradually fades, since it proves at odds with Furlong's past and upbringing. Born out of wedlock when her Catholic mother was sixteen years old, he was raised by the Protestant benefactor in the village, Mrs. Wilson, who kindly fostered the young woman and reiterated to the boy that small things could mean a lot because "when added up, amount to a life" (2021, 109). Such birth circumstances and system of guiding values inevitably call to mind a Victorian scenario, which prompts the interpretation of the protagonist as fraught with what Lamorna Ash calls "an almost Dickensian sentimentality" (2021). Certainly, Furlong's

goodness and emotions are very often accentuated in the narration, while his admiration for “A Christmas Carol” and his wish to reread *David Copperfield* echo Dickens’s oeuvre, also helping to configure his personality and goodwill. This may well be uplifted by the Christmas spirit that inundates the village those days, or even result from a midlife crisis, but using Ash’s words, it is his “complex, nuanced inner life” (2021) that separates him from those nineteenth-century clichés. Thus, when talking to his wife Eileen about their Christmas presents, his meditative character is presented and then complemented by an ethical alertness that will simply go *in crescendo* throughout the narrative arc of the novel:

Might things never change or develop into something else, or new? Lately he had begun to wonder what mattered, apart from Eileen and the girls. He was touching forty but didn’t feel himself getting anywhere or making any kind of headway. (2021, 32-33)

Furlong’s ruminations reach a climactic moment when he incidentally sees the horrors of the magdalens’ enslaved labour with his own eyes, and the stories he “didn’t like to believe” (2021, 40) materialise in the shape of the young women he finds cleaning the convent chapel when delivering coal to the nuns. Significantly, more than this vision of their dreadful physical state, it is the direct plea of one of the girls that calls his attention, haunting him from then on. Taking her cue from, again, nineteenth-century melodrama for this gloomy *mise-en-scène*, Keegan encapsulates here most of the tragic and hopeless conditions of the magdalens, when Sarah desperately asks: “Mister, won’t you help us? [...] Just take me as far as the river, that’s all you need do [...] I’ve nobody and all I want to do is drown meself. Can you not even do that fukken much for us?” (2021, 41). Yet, this is by no means a case of mere sentimental attachment or doleful intensity. On the contrary, such intersubjective appeal constitutes the narrative’s centre, since at this point the protagonist experiences a genuinely affective shake that determines

his feelings, psyche and actions for the rest of the story, leading to his final empathetic gesture. As Ahmed puts it, “feelings do not simply reside within subjects and then move outward toward objects. Feelings create impressions in shared spaces of dwelling” (2010, 14). Similarly, for Clare Hemmings, connection with others entails onto-epistemological gaps that we can fill through the affects, being empathy one of the most salient ones. We can then affirm that by sharing this space with Sarah, Furlong goes through an “affective dissonance” with how the magdalen has been treated, and that is the basis of the “affective solidarity” that, for Hemmings, should be inscribed in feminist knowledge and practices. In her own words,

in order to know differently we have to feel differently. Feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognised, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued, feeling that same sense in considering others; all these feelings can produce a politicised impetus to change that foregrounds the relationship between ontology and epistemology precisely because of the experience of their dissonance. (2012, 150)

Keegan constructs this momentous contact around some integral components of empathy, like the embodied knowledge projected by the suffering individual, the approximation between the subject and the object, and the transformation demanded beyond the empathic situation. She underscores, then, the importance of the contact factor, insofar as the interaction between Furlong and Sarah outstrips the character and affective features that had marked him until then, and he starts a process of “reflexivity” that sparks his desire for change, or in Hemmings’s terms, an attempt “to seek solidarity with others, not based in a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels, but on also feeling the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds” (2012, 158).

One of the distinctive elements of *Small Things like These*, in direct contrast to former representations of the Magdalen phenomenon, lies precisely in a cutting-edge description of the complex orbit of affects that inform empathic reactions to the predicament of the Laundries' inmates and extensively, the system itself. Pedwell has explored the affective spectrum in her analysis of the correlation between feminism and anti-racism, whereby empathy remains a crucial mechanism for the attainment of social justice. She refers to the "affective trajectory to empathy" as the one "in which empathy moves the 'privileged' subject from self-transformation, to acknowledgement of complicity and responsibility, to wider social action and change" (2012, 165). In fact, Keegan extraordinarily works on this complexity in what figures as a metonymic construction of the variety of responses from the Irish population, providing an examination of the extent to which social expectations affect the individual, and most particularly for my purposes here, as a strategy to insist on the transformative function of intersubjective contacts. Therefore, even if Furlong's first reaction to Sarah's supplication is "It's not up to me, girl. I can't take you anywhere" (2021, 41), he gets instantly ashamed of his own inconsideration and remains tormented for the next few days, "picturing the girls down on their hands and knees, polishing the floor, and the state they were in" (2021, 43). Seeing and talking to the magdalens connect him with their reality and anguish, thus materialising his "embodied knowledge," using Hemmings's terms, about the carceral regime in which they were forced to live.

The relevance of corporeal proximity and interaction can be grasped from the episode in which his professional duties bring Furlong to the convent coal house, where Sarah had been confined for what seemed, given her physical state, a long period of time. Their dialogue contains some of the elements of Ahmed's coinage of "the sociality of emotions" and her claim that "bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with

objects and others” (2004, 1). For her, “emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others. Indeed, attending to emotions might show how all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others” (2004, 4). In Keegan’s text, these notions are elaborated through an insistence on, first, the corporeal assimilation experienced by Furlong, and secondly, the volatile nature of his reaction. Thus, the narrator indicates that the young woman’s helplessness and inability to explain the motivation for her captivity provoke an immediate affinity between the two characters that is mediated through the body, since “When she made no reply, *he felt something of what she must be feeling* and rooted emptily in his mind for something comforting to say” (2021, 60, emphasis added). Similarly, the oscillating form of the affective-corporeal correlation takes an interesting expression when it is indicated that “once more, the ordinary part of him simply wanted to get rid of this and get on home” (2021, 61).

Nevertheless, the ending of this distancing “away” from the Magdalen Other and the start of his empathic proactivity “towards” her are shortly afterwards marked by the allusion to Sarah’s baby, who had been taken off from her during the lactation period, as usually done in the Mother and Baby Homes. Her maternal concern, constructed again in a very physical mode through references to the baby’s need to be fed, triggers in him a triple form of interpersonal encounter that comprises not only the suffering Sarah is undergoing, but also the consequences upon her baby, and most notably, the realisation that his own mother could have experienced the same mistreatment for having got pregnant outside marriage. Ultimately, this becomes the epiphanic moment of feminist empathy and a turning point for Furlong, as the narrator makes clear that by then he “began thinking freshly over what to do” (2021, 62). It seems relevant to briefly comment

here the distinction between compassion and empathy, which are two of the “humanizing emotions” (Berlant 2004, 5) that can be organised differently around the axis of in/equality. Thus, for Berlant the former is “an emotion in operation” in the sense that “it is a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is *over there*. You, the compassionate one, have a resource that would alleviate someone else’s suffering” (2004, 4, original emphasis). Compassion is also intimately associated with the Christian tradition, for which it is considered a positive virtue and also linked to other common terms like mercy and commiseration (Breyer 2019, 437). However, empathy has been described by Marjorie Garber as “the power of projecting one’s personality into the object of contemplation,” whereas “a person who shows compassion seems motivated, at least in part, by values and precepts, often those learned from religion, philosophy, or politics” (2004, 24). I believe that in her construction of the story Keegan is not unaware of this differentiation, and her position about the contrast between the two terms lies precisely upon the idea of “projection” and the expanding locus of equality that the two individuals involved in the empathic act are gradually situated as their affects and life stories merge. It is not Furlong’s Christian culture, whose deficiency will be described below, but his own interpersonal experience, both throughout his life and particularly in this revelatory moment, that makes him empathise with Sarah, and it urges him to react and go beyond his compassionate “privilege,” as understood by Garber and Pedwell.

The appearance of the Mother Superior thwarts Furlong’s determination for a while, but her cynical words and behaviour do nothing but intensify the pace of his empathic action. Hence, one of his most striking approaches towards Sarah is filtered through an insistence, despite the nun’s reluctance, on speaking to the young magdalen not simply to console her but to sincerely offer his help: “Is there anything I can do for you, *an leanbh*? [...] You’re upset now and no wonder. But Bill Furlong is my name and

I work at the coal yard, near the quays. If ever there's anything, all you need do is come down or send for me" (2021, 71-72). This excerpt incorporates an interesting point of discussion about empathy, as it alludes to contiguity but at the same time it points to the divergence between this proactive affect and more static attitudes like kindness and consideration. The fact that he is forward enough to counteract the tension generated in that carceral and Church-disciplined setting implies that the man is not simply being here socially correct and practising the "small things" learnt through his rearing, but with his "no wonder" he is again stepping out of himself, understanding her agony and already willing to personally intercede for her.

Such intercession becomes more necessary for the protagonist once he has more interpersonal contacts with those immediately around him, including, first, the highest authority in the convent. In a symbolic expression of her lack of humanity, the Mother Superior's first name is never mentioned in the story. Keegan is thus overturning the usual practice of changing the magdalens' real names when they arrived at the Laundries, as in the case of Sarah, who is called Enda, actually a male name. Characterised through recurrent sarcastic comments, the nun epitomises the Catholic Church's downgrading of unmarried mothers and other marginalised women in Ireland.⁵ Her response to the coal house episode echoes the traditional rhetoric of women's hysteria and derangement, which also runs parallel with a cynical mention of the protective function of the Church in these circumstances, as she tells Furlong: "This poor girl can't tell night from day sometimes. Whatever way we are going to mind her, I don't know [...] This is a terrible business" (2021, 63). Secondly, through his everyday life and work, Furlong remains close to Mrs. Kehoe, the local pub owner's wife, who makes clear at the Christmas Eve dinner she serves to Furlong's family that she is already informed about the details of what happened in the coal house. Although this character illustrates that gossip in the

town runs fast, her major role within the story is to represent popular lore, to set Furlong's incipient empathy against the duties of paternal care, and to portray the dangers that performing common sense could entail in the confessional and punity-driven ethos in which they live. Her address to Furlong consists of idioms, aphoristic warnings and advice like

Keep the enemy close, the bad dog with you and the good dog will not bite [...]
You've worked hard, the same as myself, to get to where you are now. You've reared a fine family of girls -and you know there's only a wall separating that place from St Margaret's. [...] They belong to different orders, but believe you me, they're all the one. You can't side against one without damaging your chances with the other. (2021, 95)

Keegan introduces here the "cruel" aspect, as understood by Berlant, of the affective transformation between the object and the subject of empathy, giving special attention to the influence that the opinion of the community may have prior to the emphatic act. And finally, Furlong's wife Eileen embodies the dissuasion from performing empathy that a close family member can oblige. Repeatedly she insists on its detrimental effects, which her husband seems not to perceive, but she is most notable in the book for positioning herself within arguments against it raised frequently by the general public. Thus, Eileen appeals to a values system based on self-centredness, incrimination and disaffection, as she tries to convince Furlong to remain far off the magdalens. Hugely double-edged, her standpoint is evident when the narrator indicates that for Eileen "such things had nothing to do with them, and that there was nothing they could do [...] If you want to get on in life, there's things you need to ignore, so you can keep on" (2021, 44-45). Curiously enough, she then also sneers at the habit by which the magdalens "were put in there because they hadn't a soul in this world to care for them. All their people did was leave

them wild and then, when they got into trouble, they turned their backs” (2021, 46); however, her insistence on a biased perception of care finishes by sententiously reminding Furlong that Sarah “*is not one of ours*” (2021, 46, original emphasis).

The variety of views within the pseudo-affective logic that governs the village helps Keegan to construct the accumulative nature of the protagonist’s emotions, while simultaneously setting up a contrast with the only contact that seems to have marked him most: Mrs. Wilson’s feminist empathic act when allowing Furlong’s mother to stay in her house despite being pregnant out of wedlock and bringing him up as part of her own family. The indifference shown by others provokes in him a series of emotions that, when measured in relation to his mother’s story of rescue, lead to rage and indignation. In this sense, he personifies how “affective solidarity,” using Hemmings’s words, “draws on a broader range of affects – rage, frustration and the desire for connection – as necessary for a sustainable feminist politics of transformation, but that does not root these in identity or other group characteristics” (2012, 148). Furlong’s anger and confrontation are conveyed when he refutes Eileen’s arguments by unsuccessfully trying to spark her empathy. Such reproach figures as one of the author’s most explicit ethical enquiries to the contemporary reader: “Isn’t it a good job Mrs. Wilson didn’t share your ideas? [...] Where would my mother have gone? Where would I be now?” (2021, 47). In a similar vein, he later puts his own life as an illegitimate child in the centre of the discussion, also reiterating the relevance of “small things” that could have been done in order to resist the institutional system and its perpetuation: “Had it not been for her [Mrs. Wilson], his mother might very well have wound up in that place [...] And only God knew what would have happened to him” (2021, 109).

To substantiate her account of the intercorporeal and intersubjective itineraries of affect and empathy, the author also draws on the lack of religious coherence, which is, of

course, an important backdrop against which the story is framed. In his contribution to *The Catholic Church in Ireland Today* (2015) Eamon Maher has pointed out that double standards have “fuelled the rage felt by many toward an institution that is supposed to stand for truth and integrity, justice and decency for all. Instead, it is now in danger of becoming a sad caricature of the aspirations of its founder. The result is a *void* that has not been adequately filled by any viable alternative” (2015, 5, emphasis added). In Keegan’s story, the critique of that incoherence is not markedly institutional, but it rests rather on common individuals’ conduct within such confessionalism, of which they have persistently participated. Hence, the scope and perdurance of the moral milieu that the Church has bolstered in the country and the hegemony granted to clerical figures, particularly in rural areas, are examined through Furlong’s appreciation of his own reaction to Sarah’s cry for help:

What most tormented him was not so much how she’d been left in the coal shed or the stance of the Mother Superior; the worst was how the girl had been handled while he was present and how he’d allowed that and had not asked about her baby – the one thing she had asked him to do – and how he had taken the money and left her there at the table with nothing before her and the breast milk leaking under the little cardigan and staining her blouse, and how he’d gone on, like a hypocrite, to Mass. (2021, 87)

This passage is worth quoting at length as it exploits, on the one hand, the melodramatic elements mentioned above, particularly through the magdalens’ corporeal torture that Keegan brings to wider public knowledge. On the other hand, the scene situates the reader in front of the passivity that the parishioners showed before the authority of the Church figures, as the nun assumes that Furlong will concur with her treatment of Sarah; and finally, the narrator’s introspection into the protagonist’s mind challenges an artificial

observance of religion. Church-going, mass rites and liturgies have been traditionally more important than doing truly Christian actions for peers in need, contravening the ideas of Jesus Christ himself, who advocated the importance of dedicating ourselves to others and practicing the love of our neighbour.

The reinscription of happiness

In the final chapter of the book, Keegan gives more narrative attention to how Furlong eventually becomes determined to fill the “void,” as conceived by Maher, and we confirm the embodied condition of his affects when reading that “[f]or days, something hard had been gathering on his chest” (2021, 89). This corporeal expression is symptomatic of the social and moral difficulties and damage that any radical form of helping Sarah would bring in for Furlong himself and his family. Indeed, the protagonist is overwhelmed “by the fear of what he could not yet see but knew he would encounter” (2021, 107). There are also some economic elements embedded in his alarm, which attest to the author’s gifted incorporation of capitalism into the critique of the institutional structure of the Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes. It has been widely demonstrated within the Magdalen literature how Church and State benefited from the free labour done by the inmates (Finnegan 2001; Smith 2007; Hogan 2019; McGettrick *et al.* 2021). Yet, cultural productions and critical examinations of how confronting the system could impact those who dared to do so are certainly scant. What *Small Things like These* relevantly denotes in this sense is the convergence of the limits set by both the neoliberal and the moral order in which Furlong is performing his Magdalen empathy, as inferred from comments like “The fact was that he would pay for it” (2021, 108). Consequently, his affects appear conflicted again when, after releasing Sarah from the convent coal house in which she is still incarcerated, “he felt his self-preservation and courage battling against each other

and thought, once more, of taking the girl to the priest's house -but several times, already, his mind had gone on ahead and met him there, and had concluded that the priests already knew" (2021, 106). Keegan elaborates here again on the co-responsibility of all the clerics sustaining the institutional network of female repression, whose hegemony Furlong gets eventually spirited to overthrow.

Nevertheless, at the core of his ultimate empathic performance when he brings the ailing magdalen to his own home walking with her publicly around New Ross also rests the certainty that "the worst was yet to come" (2021, 109). On these last pages of the book, Furlong signifies Berlant's claim of cruel optimism "as a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or possible, and toxic," and that it is "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (2002, 24). According to her, individuals in search for what she calls "the good-life fantasy" must develop "adjustment to the transformation of what had seemed foundational into those binding kinds of optimistic relation we call 'cruel'" (2002, 3). Consequently, optimism arises when there is "a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently" (Berlant, 2002, 14). This may be a similar case for Furlong, who becomes gradually aware of the social and also economic re-fittings he will have to do in his everyday life by admitting an outcast woman into his large family and his humble economy. It is empathy, but also hope, which according to Berlant aligns with optimism since both are "future-oriented" (2002, 13), what urge him to maintain his attachment to Sarah. As Keegan herself mentions in her note at the end of the novel, in the institutions "Many girls and women lost their babies. Some lost their lives. Some or most lost the lives they could have had" (113). This is precisely what Furlong, out of

empathy and in a very sacrificial mode, is willing to do even at the expense of his own stability and reputation, so that Sarah can start a new existence.

Therefore, the novel's final paragraphs reflect on the effects of empathy by bringing up the reciprocal, circular implications on the empathic subject's affects. In a conclusive correlation of the two main characters, the author intertwines their respective corporeality and subjectivity, placing them both as victims of the system: "Whatever suffering he was now to meet was a long way from what the girl at his side had already endured" (2021, 110). Their assimilation is measured in terms of the adversities inherent to Ireland's institutional system, which continues to injure those people who confront the tenets on which it was founded. Yet, Keegan seems particularly interested in the impact that empathy may generate for both the subject and the object, thus destabilising the privilege chasm pointed out by Pedwell and Berlant. Resulting from an integral practice of empathy, the two protagonists bear their mark in equally transformative terms. In the case of Sarah, she is released from an oppressive rule that was decimating her existence, and Furlong, by extension, is also liberated from the yoke of social expectations and feigned religiosity. Thus, despite all the obstacles he knows are looming, Furlong manages to remove the "cruel" component of his optimism, as he wonders if "Was it possible that the best bit of him was shining forth, and surfacing?" (2021, 108). In this respect, I find particularly significant that such newly acquired enthusiasm is predicated on a non-nuclear mode of paternity, since we learn that he had never been that happy, "not even when his infant girls were first placed in his arms" (2021, 108-109).

Similarly, the novel's ending is utterly thought-provoking in offering new perspectives on the politics of happiness that has sustained modern and contemporary societies. Ahmed interrogates the traditional views of "the science of happiness", which has been considered as a measure of human progress. However, she finds problematic

that happiness is evaluated through “categories that are value laden” (2010, 4), which are external and may be far from people’s own feelings. In her redefinition of this practice, she defends the need to focus, on the contrary, on “the everyday habits of happiness” since they “involve ways of thinking about the world that shape how the world coheres” (2010, 15). In the same vein, Ahmed discusses how we are repeatedly guided by “the promise of happiness” depending on whether we do or not what is considered happiness-productive. Another key issue in her proposal is her critique of polarised subjective and social indicators of happiness; for her, we should consider instead that “ordinary attachments to the very idea of the good life are also sites of ambivalence, involving the confusion rather than separation of good and bad feelings. Reading happiness would then become a matter of reading the grammar of this ambivalence” (2010, 6). Constructed on similar terms, the new existence that Furlong has brought onto himself, his family and Sarah does not conform to the conventional politics of happiness or good life that permeates the town and the wider socio-economic milieu in Ireland, while inducing in him a state of wavering affects. Paradoxically, what could be considered as a socio-economic disadvantage is essential for his reinscribed sense of happiness, so this self-inflicted “misery” appears in line with Ahmed’s observation that in contemporary societies killjoys are necessary “to make room for life, to make room for possibility, for chance” (2010, 20). In fact, the narrator’s final comments insist on how at this stage for the protagonist “his fear more than outweighed every other feeling” (2021, 110), so we can confirm not only the ambivalence and circularity of his affects, but also that even fear, an emotion habitually considered unfavourable, can beget a new form of happiness. Moreover, these closing reflections most significantly suggest how empathy has brought the protagonist to a set of beliefs in which his Catholic faith is substituted by reliance on the power of human interaction: “He not only hoped but legitimately believed that they

would manage” (2021, 110). Furlong’s religiosity and that of the social order that surrounds him are then capsized through his affective dissonance from such incoherent culture and through his inclination, instead, towards more ethical and humane practices of fellow interconnections.

In the outer reach of *Small Things like These*, such dissent provides an added insight into Berlant’s defense of affective attachment in situations of evident disruption that has to do with the gap, or void, that still needs to be filled between Furlong’s fictional act of empathic resistance in the 1980s and the present-day conditions of the Magdalen Laundries phenomenon. Keegan is far from suggesting with this story that the institutional system in Ireland can be easily or individually beaten; but by leaving an open ending and allowing the reader to imagine the outcomes that performing Magdalen empathy may bring for all the characters, she poses a relevant question about the need to affectively react against the ordinary and to construct a consistent culture of empathy towards these women. In a country where even at the present time the survivors of the system have not yet received full official acknowledgement of the violent treatment they received while incarcerated, and they continue to experience various forms of indifference, empathic proactivity is not only ethically (and morally) necessary, but also urgent for the attainment of social justice. In this light, Keegan follows a current artistic direction of silence-breaking taken by Irish writers and cultural producers, who demonstrate how “Irish society is now an active participant in the performance of protest, confession, and witnessing [...] Decades of tribunals, commissions, and reports into misconduct and abuse by the Roman Catholic Church and the Irish state have created a space in which Irish society can be active” (Flynn and Murphy 2022, 7).

Conclusion

All in all, a closer look at how Keegan articulates her story of empathy around multidimensional affective interactions renders manifest the author's suggestion that sharing and interdependence lie at the core of an ethically sustainable society. Relationality and empathy appear strongly connected in *Small Things like These* both as theoretical conceptualisations and most importantly, as conjoint elements of feminist social praxis. The protagonists illustrate how the contact factor can make a considerable change, so that the empathetic subject, being engaged and going out of him/herself, starts the process of self, and extensively social, transformation. In bearing witness to the notion of interrelational circularity that I have argued throughout earlier sections of this article, Furlong and Sarah represent the new opportunities that, residing on empathy, religious integrity, optimism, hope and new understandings of happiness, lay open for the profound shift towards a fairer future for the survivors of Ireland's Magdalen institutions. Quoting Maher again, "It is far from easy to assess something as personal and tenuous as religious sensibility. What people feel in their hearts and express publicly are often very different" (2015, 6). However, as I have tried to prove, this novel proclaims that the coincidence of those inner and public expressions is also possible, and that the religious component of such sensibility can be redirected through human interdependent affinities. For the construction of a renovated culture in which the ethical responsibilities to the survivors of Ireland's institutional past are adequately met, empathy should be more radically taken on because, as Keegan proposes, this affective practice can be effective in order to resist and transcend the continuum of Magdalen injustice. In this sense, the novel intersects with current theories and practices in a more global context whose main agenda is to reach a social order in which alliances and interpersonal communion are achieved and sustained over time.

Notes

1. Since the first revelations about the operations within this institutional network, a common line of research has concentrated on evidencing the extensive mistreatment of women inside the Laundries and Homes, also shedding some light on the cultural and ideological rationale of the system. For a comprehensive analysis of historical records and personal testimonies, see Finnegan (2001), McCarthy (2010), Prunty (2017) and Hogan (2019), to name but a few, and visit the website of the advocacy group [Justice for Magdalenes Research](#).
2. The Magdalen phenomenon has been tackled from various representational and analytical angles. In the past few years, special relevance has been given to the public, official recognition of the Magdalen survivors' testimonies through various projects and activist campaigns (see O'Donnell 2018; McGettrick *et al.* 2021; Hidalgo-Tenorio and Benítez-Castro 2021).
3. The New Ross Magdalen Asylum was one of the four institutions founded in Ireland by the congregation of The Good Shepherd Sisters as early as 1860 and it admitted women "penitents" who did "training" in laundry work and sewing until its closure in 1967 (Finnegan 2001, 114-156).
4. Keegan's work has often been considered "anachronistic" and set against other major Irish literary novelists like John McGahern or Edna O'Brien. However, as argued by Wu (2022), her treatment of literary tropes and narrative techniques can also be interpreted as a critique of Ireland's neoliberal order.
5. For an analysis of the continuation of dismissive attitudes like this held by the religious orders, see Hogan (2019). Her critique revolves around the Catholic Church's refusal to open the archives, the problems this inaccessibility has provoked upon the former magdalens and their families, and how the orders have not contributed to the redress scheme set up by the State (2019, 64-65).

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