

ABSTRACT

KROCKER, SARAH ELIZABETH. *Half a Woman: The Nun in Film from WWII to the Present*. (Under the direction of Maria Pramaggiore.)

Half a Woman examines how six prominent nun films signify the changing perception of the nun in postwar America and Great Britain. Through the changing perspective of the populace, as well as historical influences such as the Feminist Movement, the nun has shifted from the angelic entity of the mid-1940s in *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945) and *Lilies of the Field* (1963) to the sexual demon of the 1970s and 1980s with *The Devils* (1971). After the 1980s, the nun was not only a sexual demon but a platform for political commentary. *Agnes of God* (1983), *Dead Man Walking* (1995), and *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) all use the nun to express a political stance on topics affecting women, as well as society at the turn of the 21st century.

**HALF A WOMAN:
THE NUN IN FILM FROM WWII TO THE PRESENT**

by
SARAH ELIZABETH KROCKER

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Maria Pramaggiore, Chair of Advisory Committee
Dr. Marsha Orgeron
Dr. Thomas Lisk

DEDICATION

It has been a long and winding road to get to this point and there are three people without whom I wouldn't have made it this far.

First, I'd like to dedicate this thesis to my husband, Raymond Bonilla, for all of your emotional and editorial support and for listening to the countless hours of mindless ramblings that helped to culminate in my ultimate thesis formation. Thank you for sharing your love of film and writing with me.

Secondly, to Dr. Peter Fraser, mentor, film lover, and good friend. Without you my realization that film is more than just simple entertainment would never have been made.

Lastly, I lovingly dedicate this work to my grandfather, Frank Schleicher. If it were not for your spending countless hours with me as I grew from a child to an adult, my love of reading, writing, and the arts might never have come to fruition. My first teacher. Thank you for everything.

BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Elizabeth Krockner was born in Appleton, Wisconsin. In May 2002 she received her Bachelors Degree in English with a minor in Philosophy from Wisconsin Lutheran College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Sarah moved to North Carolina to pursue her education. After her Master's work at North Carolina State University, she intends to go on to earn her PhD in Film Studies and to ultimately teach the subject.

Sarah has two academic papers published through CHARiS as part of the First and Second Annual Undergraduate Research Symposium at Wisconsin Lutheran College. In January 2005, she participated in the New Voices in Irish Criticism Conference in Limerick, Ireland where she first presented her ideas on the nun that would form part of the foundation for her thesis work.

The nun became a topic of interest for Sarah during her class on Irish Cinema, taught by Dr. Maria Pramaggiore. After writing a paper on *The Magdalene Sisters*, Sarah was riveted by the topic and as time for her thesis approached, she chose to address the image of the nun in film.

Through the present, Sarah's passion lies in the realm of film criticism and she is the Chief Operating Officer and a frequent contributor to the online film criticism website SMART-POPCORN.com. As well as writing film criticism, Sarah runs a podcast show entitled the *Picture Show Pundits* where she discusses films with other staff members of SMART-POPCORN.com on a weekly basis.

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Introduction

"But Look At Me! I'm a Nun! I'm a Penguin!"

The Catholic Nun is both a staple and a stereotype within the realm of visual art. She has been depicted as both cruel and unyielding, battering young children's hands with a ruler, or as the pinnacle of kindness and selflessness, staying by the bedside of a young soldier who has been horribly disfigured. The nun has made her appearance many times in our visual culture, but her image is ever changing. Once she was crafted in the holy figure of Christ's Bride and was proclaimed "America's first feminist" (Fialka, 2). Yet today, and for quite some time before, mentioning the word "nun" evokes a wide range of emotions, many of which are negative.

"Look at me! I'm a nun! I'm a penguin!" is not only a funny line delivered by a whimsical Whoopi Goldberg in Emile Ardolino's *Sister Act* (1992), but it is also a poignant reference to the spectacle of the nun. A nun is commonly referred to, derogatorily or jovially depending on the situation, as a penguin because she wears a black and white habit but also because she usually walks with other sisters in a line or small group, much as penguins do. Penguins and nuns are similar in that they are social creatures and care about their community, though the reference likely draws no such connections.

I felt that evoking one of the most widely known and beloved nun films would help divert your attention away from the smarting smacks of a ruler. You can ask almost any person to name a nun film and more often than not he or she will answer with *Sister Act*. When I was developing this thesis, I called on family and friends for suggestions and every single one of them mentioned *Sister Act*. Not only is it one of the most prominent

comedic nun films, but it also references the second most mentioned nun film, *Nuns on the Run* (Lynn, 1990). Now that I have made you smile in fond recollection of these farcical favorites, I am sorry to say I am not covering *Sister Act* or *Nuns on the Run* in this study of the nun.

Instead, I have chosen to address six very prominent and influential nun films and to examine how these films signify the changing perception of the nun in postwar America and Great Britain. Through the changing perspective of the populace, as well as historical influences such as the Feminist Movement, the nun has shifted from the angelic entity of the mid-1940s in *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945) and *Lilies of the Field* (1963) to the sexual demon of the 1970s and 1980s with *The Devils* (1971). After the 1980s, the nun was not only a sexual demon but a platform for political commentary. *Agnes of God* (1983), *Dead Man Walking* (1995), and *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) all use the nun to express a political stance on topics affecting women, as well as society at the turn of the 21st century.

During the postwar era of the fifties and sixties, Hollywood created the image of the immaculately devoted nun. The role of the nun in film was, in this era, strongly influenced by social conditions brought about by the growing changes in the Women's Rights Movement. The nun is first seen in the mid-1940s as an angelic entity, coming to the aid of the wounded, helping to rear children and build a better community, but when she interacts with a male lead she is forced into a role of agitation. In Leo McCarey's *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945) and Ralph Nelson's *Lilies of the Field* (1963) the nun becomes a social reference point, reflecting women's equality to men. Sister Benedict (Ingrid Bergman) in *The Bells of St. Mary's* is paired with Father O'Malley (Bing Crosby) and the

two try to find a happy medium to run St. Mary's School together. A power struggle ensues and Sister Benedict is treated like a child; fragile, wide-eyed, and in need of help from a man like Father O'Malley. Sister Benedict is a strong woman, running an institution and having a resolute devotion to God, but despite her strong will and unshakeable faith, she has contracted tuberculosis. Her infection has been caught early, but the men in the film dote on her and use their knowledge of her condition to manipulate her position of power at St. Mary's School. Sister Benedict is an angelic beauty with God on her side, but she is removed from her position of power by Father O'Malley. This social commentary reflects the postwar struggle of working women to keep the jobs once reserved for men but given to the women while the men were off fighting the war. Once the men return, the woman is a threat to their role of the breadwinner. Films like *The Bells of St. Mary's* use the nun to comment on the power struggle.

As the tumultuous sixties approached, the role of the woman was paired with another struggling group of Americans. Ralph Nelson directed William E. Bennett's adapted novel, *Lilies of the Field* in 1963, in which an East German nun finds the help she has been praying for in a transient black man looking for work. Homer Smith (Sidney Poitier) and Mother Maria (Lilia Skala) are paired as determined opposites, yet needing each other for support in a world where both women and African Americans are struggling to find equality. Representing both the Women's Rights Movement and the Civil Rights Movement, Homer Smith and Mother Maria overcome the oppression of the white man in the film, Mr. Ashton (Ralph Nelson), who has all the material needed to accomplish their job but is unwilling to support their cause.

Mother Maria, like Sister Benedict, is treated like a child by those in her community. She is stubborn and determined to get her way when it comes to building the chapel, which even makes the traveling priest, Father Murphy (Dan Frazer), think that she is a little crazy. Devoted to God and thankful only to him, Mother Maria prays for everything and she convinces everyone that God is giving them the means to build his chapel. Once her chapel is built, she immediately starts to plan for a school and a hospital, desiring to expand, which reflects the common idea that nuns are the pioneers of education (Fialka, 3). Although she is rough and tough, Mother Maria is an angelic nun, finding favor with God and working to help her community.

Angelic devotion to the community and to God shifts towards the end of the 1960s, with sex becoming the predominant focus of nun films. Actresses are no longer goddesses of the silver screen, but objects for male consumption. Their acting talent was meaningless if they possessed the ability to tempt the audience's carnal desires. With the debasement of women into salacious objects, it was time to tackle the saintly image of the nun.

During the 1970s and 1980s, impure nuns ravage the film screen. British director Ken Russell was one of the first in a long line of directors to tackle Aldous Huxley's novel *The Devils of Loudun*, which tells the true story of a convent of nuns in seventeenth century France who find themselves possessed and accuse Father Grandier, one of the prominent priests in Loudun, of possessing them. *The Devils* was released in England in 1971, having been heavily censored by the British Board of Film Censors and vehemently rejected by the public both in Great Britain and in the United States.

The lead nun, Sister Jeanne (Vanessa Redgrave), runs the Loudun Ursuline convent, where many women have been forced into divine imprisonment because they are useless and pose a moral threat to society. Unlike the previous two nuns, Sister Jeanne represents a demonic nun. She is sexually depraved (masturbating and having sexual visions of Father Grandier), morally corrupt (lying about being possessed by Father Grandier), and selfish. Sister Jeanne and the other nuns become the focus of lecherous acts provoked by the male heads of church and state. These women are out of control and the men in the film struggle to contain them through exorcisms and by locking them up in the convent, even attempting a mass execution. *The Devils* examines the question, "Once women's sexual desires are released after having been severely oppressed, how is it possible to contain them?" Through the use of the nun, who has sworn herself to a life of chastity, the emergence of women's sexuality and sexual freedom as well as the dangers of this new sexual freedom to society are exhibited in full force.

Yet, as the eighties advanced, a political spin was added to the story of the nun, while keeping with the idea that a woman's sexuality cannot be hidden beneath a habit. With teen pregnancy on the rise in America, safe sex and a woman's right to choose became issues at the forefront of the women's movement. Only a decade prior to *Agnes of God's* (1983) release, *Roe vs. Wade* gave women the right to choose, forcing all states to legalize the abortion procedure. Also, according to *The Guttmacher Project*, "in the 1970s and early 1980s, the U.S. teen pregnancy rates rose. They remained steady through the 1980s, even as sexual activity among teens increased, due to improved contraceptive use among those teenagers who are sexually active" (Boonstra). Norman Jewison's *Agnes*

of God touches on the subject of teen pregnancy as well as abortion and the education of a woman about her own body.

Sister Agnes (Meg Tilly) is a 17-year-old simpleton, unable to read and write, but she has a beautiful voice and visions of God. One evening in Montreal, Canada, her screams echo through the convent as she gives birth to and then strangles a baby. Mother Miriam (Anne Bancroft) swears that Sister Agnes knows nothing about the birth and that she is an innocent, even believing that she is a saint. Through long interviews and investigation Dr. Martha Livingston (Jane Fonda) starts to uncover the truth, though the reality of the events is left for the viewer to decide. *Agnes of God*, like *The Devils*, asks the viewer to question the motives of the characters and even challenge the position of the film. Did Agnes know that she was pregnant? Was she responsible for the death of the baby? Did the church help with the cover-up to protect their name? This film puts the nun in the position to challenge underage pregnancy and the scandalous nature of the church while using an angelic nun who believes that God has sent his angel, Michael, to impregnate her. Sister Agnes is a return to the immaculately devoted nun of the early postwar era, but she is counteracted by Mother Miriam who represents a modern day approach to religion and the church, where saints no longer exist and becoming a nun is a way to hide from the world.

The end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s brought about a new idea of the nun, which was an amalgamation of the previous notions of the image from the decades past. Her portrayal ranged from overtly sexual to extremely reserved, but only one performance recreated the image of the nun turning her into a political issue. In 1995, Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon released their political repudiation of the death penalty

with *Dead Man Walking*. Sister Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon) is based on a real life nun of the same name. The film is based on the book by Sister Helen, where she retells the story of her interactions with two death row inmates who were imprisoned at the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Her story is a moral denunciation of the death penalty, which was a hot topic during the 1980s, 1990s and even still today. In Tim Robbins' envisioning of Sister Helen's text, he not only humanized the nun but called on her to be at the forefront of the political debate raging in America.

Sister Helen Prejean is a social worker in the heart of New Orleans who receives a letter from an inmate at the state prison. Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn) feels he was wrongly placed on death row, accused of killing two teenagers. Sister Helen feels that talking to him and visiting him would be good for her to do, but slowly Poncelet starts to form a connection with her. The bond of trust between Sister Helen and Poncelet is made even stronger when Poncelet asks Sister Helen to be his spiritual advisor during his execution. During the long process of appeals and finally the walk down death row, Sister Helen is subjected to the multi-faceted world of capital punishment. Not only does Susan Sarandon humanize the image of the nun, basing her on the real life Sister Helen, but she is a "new nun." She rebukes the old ways of the Sisterhood by subscribing to the decree of the Second Vatican Council, which allows Sisters to wear clothing appropriate to their environment. Sister Helen represents the group of nuns who feel it is not simply the clothes that define you, but how you act, speak, and believe. The "new nun" does not dress like a nun but acts the way a nun does. It is no longer the power of the position that can change events but the actions of the person in the position. Instead of dependence on God to make things happen, it is actions of the nun that help bring about change.

Dead Man Walking tackles the issues of capital punishment and the changing status of women in the workplace, while using the nun in an approachable way. The nun is given a place in modern society as an angelic nun who works for her community and the good of mankind, while also serving God to the best of her ability, without His grandiose divine intervention.

Yet, while all is well and good during the mid-1990s, trouble is brewing as the social climate rages warfare on the Church. Films such as *Primal Fear* (Hoblit, 1996), *Stigmata* (Wainwright, 1999) and *Dogma* (Smith, 1999) addressed the growing concerns of people who criticized priests, cardinals, and the Vatican. In 2002, the smaller screens of the independent theatres featured two films that brought the nun back to the limelight of controversy. *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys* (Care, 2002) made Sister Assumpta (Jodie Foster) a comic book super-villain in the eyes of the four lead boys, Francis (Emile Hirsch), Tim (Kieran Culkin), Wade (Jake Richardson), and Joey (Tyler Long). And director Peter Mullan became part of the tradition of painting the nun as a villain with his controversial film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002). Through the tale of three young women and their confinement in a Magdalene Laundry, Mullan actualizes a bitterly telling image of the horrors these nuns once inflicted upon their charges. The nuns in Mullan's film become a platform for political commentary on the power of the church in society, specifically Ireland. Sister Bridget (Geraldine McEwan), the head of the laundry, has become so drunk with power and greed that she no longer cares about the spiritual well-being of her charges. Instead, she abuses them in ways that make the concept of a slight tap of the ruler seem like a soft breeze caressing your cheek.

The nun tackles the political issues of religious influence. Ireland is heavily influenced by their religion and, with the election and re-election of George W. Bush in the United States, the religiously moral masses have become the dominant voice. But this is not the only issue that *The Magdalene Sisters* addresses. The nun is a woman of power, more than any other nun we have seen before. She answers to no one; even the priests and bishops stay out of her way. She is the ultimate woman, but an ultimate woman without a soul. As in *The Devils*, it is a question of giving women power but then containing them when they become out of control. Even in *The Devils*, the nuns are contained within the convent, just as Sister Bridget's power is reserved only for the girls in the laundry.

Sister Bridget's power is out of control and her focus is only on greed. Sister Prejean says at the end of *Dead Man Walking*, "It's not faith, it's work." Sister Bridget is only at the laundry for the work, not religious piety and her aggressive, bitter behavior is a staple of women who assume supreme power. She is a demonic portrayal of real life nuns who ran the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland during the 1950s, and forces viewers to question the role of the church in their lives as well as in society.

What is most striking about the portrayal of the nun in film is that she is never allowed to be both an angel and a demon. Women are diverse creatures, potentially running the gamut from angel to demon, but the nun is never given that opportunity. She is either wholly good with God at her side or wholly evil, usurping God's power. The nun as she is presented in postwar cinema is only fully understood when she is paired with a man (*The Bells of St. Mary's*, *Lilies of the Field*, *The Devils*, *Dead Man Walking*) or seen in light of a man's world (*Agnes of God*, *Magdalene Sisters*).

While researching the nun, I stumbled upon an intriguing quote: "A nun, at best, is only half a woman, just as a priest is only half a man." I thought, what an interesting concept, but while I searched for an answer I could not find anything but the angry ramblings of a one Henry Louis Mencken. H.L. Mencken is most notable for his publications on the absurdity of Christianity and I thought it would be delightful to evoke this witty commentator as I began my journey to unravel the intricacies of the nun in film.

The nun and the priest are only half a woman and half a man because they have sworn to never consummate a relationship. In Catholic dogma, when two people marry they become one person; before that, they are merely parts of each other floating in the night. The nun, as she is seen in film, is never married, making her only half a woman because she is unable to fulfill her duties as a wife and mother, as dictated by social standards and religious dogma. These nuns are truly independent women capable of great things, but they speak to the social expectations for women during the eras in which the films were made. The nun is presented as either an angel or a demon, but her ability to bring to the forefront the ideas of the role of women in the world is powerful, despite her inability to perform the standard duties of mother and wife, leaving her only half a woman.

Chapter One
"Do You Think It's a Good Thing to Let Her Feel Important?"
1945-1969

1945 - Harry S. Truman (D) starts his term as president of the United States. Hitler commits suicide & Germany surrenders. United States drops an atomic bomb on Hiroshima & Nagasaki, Japan. *The Bells of St. Mary's* nominated for Best Motion Picture at the 18th Annual Academy Awards.

1946 - Cannes Film Festival debuts. Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* opens world wide.

1947 - India & Pakistan released from British rule. *Black Narcissus* released in England.

1948 - The Hollywood 10 called before the House of Un-American Activities Committee. Truman ends racial segregation in military. Alfred Kinsey publishes *Sexual Behavior in the American Male*.

1950 - Korean War begins.

1951 - Color television introduced in the United States.

1952 - Elizabeth II becomes Queen of England. Dwight D. Eisenhower (R) is elected president of the United States of America.

1953 - Stalin dies. Korean armistice signed. Hollywood creates wide-screen processes.

1954 - Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka.

1955 - Rosa Parks refuses to sit at the back of the bus.

1957 - The "Little Rock Nine" integrate Arkansas high school. Russians launch Sputnik 1, first Earth-orbiting satellite - the Space Age begins.

1959 - Fidel Castro takes over Cuba. Godard's *Breathless* released, kicking the French New Wave into full gear.

1960 - John F. Kennedy (D) elected president of the United States. Alfred Hitchcock releases *Psycho*. The FDA approves birth control pills. U.S. military in South Vietnam.

1961 - Bay of Pigs Invasion. East Germans erect the Berlin Wall. Betty Friedan publishes *The Feminine Mystique*.

1962 - Cuban Missile Crisis. Pope John XXIII opens Second Vatican Council.

1963 - Pope John XXIII dies & Pope Paul VI is elected. U.S. Supreme Court rules no recitation of The Lord's Prayer or Bible verses in public schools. "I have a dream" speech delivered. John F. Kennedy is assassinated. Lyndon B. Johnson (D) takes over as president of the U.S.. *Lilies of the Field* nominated for Best Motion Picture at the 36th Annual Academy Awards.

1964 - The Beatles appear on The Ed Sullivan Show.

1965 - *The Sound of Music* wins Best Motion Picture at the 38th Annual Academy Awards.

1966 - The National Organization for Women (NOW) is founded by a group of feminists, including Betty Friedan.

1968 - Tet offensive. My Lai massacre. Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated. Senator Robert F. Kennedy is assassinated. Richard Nixon (R) is voted president of the United States. The Motion Pictures Association of America debuts the motion picture rating system with G, PG, R and X.

1969 - Neil Armstrong takes the first steps on the moon. Woodstock Festival. Sesame Street debuts. *Midnight Cowboy* wins Best Motion Picture at the 42nd Annual Academy Awards and is the only X-rated film to ever receive an Academy Award.

During the postwar era of the forties, fifties and sixties, the role of the nun in film was strongly influenced by social conditions, and in the latter part of this era, the growing changes brought about by the Women's Rights Movement. In the 1940s and 1950s, soldiers were coming home from the war, and women, who had held positions in the workplace, were being urged back to the kitchens. Women "were given positions of authority, in the war and at home, in films and out, that they would be unwilling to relinquish" (Haskell, 192). Few women were given the choice to stay at their jobs and "the nation welcomed the men home and began enforcing the promise the women workers had made--or the country had decided they made--to give up their jobs for the returning soldiers" (Collins, 394). Many women did not want to leave their positions, or after they did leave many wanted to return to the workforce. Most were older women whose children no longer solely depended on them. Those women who were able to return to a job outside of the home were not always granted with fulfilling careers, only positions to fill the void in their life.

Now that women had experienced the other side of the gender coin, normality was slowly redefined. To counteract the backlash of women seeking to take over the workplace, the role of the *femme fatale* dominated the female presence on screen as *film noir* burst onto the scene. These "new women," as Sarah Grand dubbed the emerging independent woman in an earlier era--the 1890s--were perceived as a threat to the existence of a regular home. But there was one role for women that did not depict them as morally questionable while still allowing them to express their independence.

Contrary to entrenched stereotypes, nuns can be the movers and shakers of the community. The nun is first seen in films of the mid-1940s as an angelic entity, coming

to the aid of the wounded, helping to rear children and build a better community. She secures a job outside of the home by running schools and hospitals, but when she interacts with a male lead she is forced into a role of agitation, sparking the central conflict of the plot. In Leo McCarey's *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945) and Ralph Nelson's *Lilies of the Field* (1963) the nun becomes a social reference point, reflecting the role of women and their equality to men. Rebecca Sullivan draws out the influence of the nun film's place in America's postwar society in her article "Celluloid Sisters," by explaining that the nuns were "making sacrificial labor a crucial element of their religious identity, [and] they brought the feminine ideals of working women to a higher, spiritual level. That delicate balance between self-abnegation and heroic purposefulness became central to the representation of nuns in popular culture" (57).

In this postwar portrayal of the nun on film, she is angelic, watching over those in need. She fills the role of mother, mentor, teacher, and nurse. She is the holy and pious servant of God, tending to the needs of those around her. Virtuous and forgiving, she moves through the world as a blessing to all she comes into contact with. Whenever a nun is around, good things are sure to follow.

Typically, the nun in film was physically attractive. More often than not, the lead role was played by an attractive actress such as Ingrid Bergman (*The Bells of St. Mary's*), Audrey Hepburn (*The Nun's Story*), Deborah Kerr (*Black Narcissus* and *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*), Rosalind Russell (*Sister Kenny* and *The Trouble with Angels*), Anna Karina (*La Religieuse*), Mary Tyler Moore (*Change of Habit*), or Sally Fields ("The Flying Nun"), just to name a few of the most prominent stars. This made the nun a much more appealing vision to behold, since her inner beauty is reflected outwardly. Yet, the nun is

objectified purely through the studio's choice of actress. By allowing her to possess above average beauty, fitting into a visually loveable cliché, the nun is no longer the perfect servant of God, but a fetishized object for the patriarchal masses.

The nun is subdued by the male lead or has her power as the head of an institution challenged by him. So while the nun is an independent woman, she is written by the screenwriters and studios as still needing a man to help her run her institution or make moral decisions. The unspoken assumption of these films is that no woman can do the job a man would typically do, not even a woman who takes religious vows that make her exempt from social claims of marriage and motherhood. Women in the workplace during this time "surely contributed to that sense of instability of dis-ease and even impotence that lurked beneath the surface of male characters and charged the atmosphere with a tension not entirely accounted for by plot" (Haskell, 194).

The Bells of St. Mary's and *Lilies of the Field* both specifically deal with the multi-faceted dimensions of women through the guise of the nun. Without becoming a *femme fatale*, the character of the nun is allowed to be just as independent and headstrong as the male lead, which makes the nun stand out as an archetypal character in Hollywood cinema. The nun is what Molly Haskell refers to as the "superwoman." Haskell characterizes the "superwoman" as "able to achieve her ends in a man's world, to insist on her intelligence, to insist on using it" and only to agree to a relationship "after an equal bargain has been struck of conditions mutually agreed on" (230).

Nuns in early postwar films appeared as beautiful, angelic saints, much like Sister Mary Benedict in *The Bells of St. Mary's* (McCarey, 1945). Ingrid Bergman had just stolen the spotlight and the hearts of American moviegoers everywhere with her role as

Ilsa in *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942). She even had a Hitchcock film under her belt (*Spellbound*, 1945) and another was on the way (*Notorious*, 1946). Bergman was cast in the role of a nun to play alongside Bing Crosby returning to his role as Father O'Malley from *Going My Way* (McCarey, 1944). Leo McCarey wanted Ingrid Bergman to star as the "devoted sensible, down-to-earth nun in the sequel." Aware of David O. Selznick's disapproval of sequels, he turned to Bergman in order to get her on board. Once Bergman heard about the role, she demanded that Selznick sign on or she would "go back to Sweden." Sure enough, Selznick caved and McCarey got his leading woman (Spoto, 174-175).

In David Spoto's biography *Notorious: The Life of Ingrid Bergman*, he recounts the way in which Bergman prepared for her role as Sister Benedict:

From her visits with the sisters, Ingrid took away concrete ideas about how and how not to portray Sister Benedict in *The Bells of St. Mary's*. She was delighted to have every cliché about nuns shattered: she saw no sentimental, saccharine piety in the lives of these women. Instead, she saw quiet devotion, hard work, strength of purpose and a refreshing sense of humor. These women were in many ways, Ingrid was surprised to learn, very like herself. (175)

Yet, Sister Benedict falls prey to some shattered clichés. She exhibits "strength of purpose" and a "sense of humor," but the "sentimental, saccharine piety" is also there. This sugar-coated religiosity is strongest during Sister Benedict's final prayer in the church before she leaves the school. She asks God to make her see the good in all things.

(Bergman also attributed these clichés to her own personality, which is what made her the perfect choice for Sister Benedict.)

Sister Benedict runs the St. Mary's school which has just lost its head priest, opening the door to Father O'Malley. Not only does he come in to replace the previous priest, but he is also there to assess whether or not the school needs to be shut down and the students sent to St. Victor's across town. Father O'Malley's assessment is not easy with Sister Benedict bustling around, reminding him that the school will be taken care of by God.

Part of what makes Sister Benedict so powerful is her clothing. The principal outward characteristic of a nun is her habit. It distinguishes her position of authority as a devoted follower of God. Each piece of the habit represents each order's credo regarding its relationship to God. Sister Benedict's entire body is covered, but her head and her face are still visible. Typically, habits were not tightly cinched around the waist and most were unflattering to the figure, cloaking the curves of the body. The shedding of the womanly attributes through the cloaking of the body is a sign of piety and the rejection of pride. No longer must she worry about making herself look attractive for onlookers. She can now focus on her devotion to God. Unlike the traditional habits of Franciscan nuns, Sister Benedict and her sisters wear a habit that flatters their female figure, cinching at the waist, exposing a shapely feminine figure beneath.

The costume renders Sister Benedict attractive, but it also signifies her power and authority. There is only one moment where Sister Benedict removes a significant piece of her uniform and that is when her power over St. Mary's starts to slip. In the scene following Sister Benedict's discussion with Father O'Malley about whether or not to fail

the student, Patsy (Joan Carroll), Sister Benedict is escorted by several nuns out of the school and to her quarters. It is reported to Father O'Malley that she fainted in the chapel, where it is assumed she was praying for a new school building. Father O'Malley, going against Sister Benedict's wishes, calls a doctor to come and examine her. O'Malley arrives at Sister Benedict's quarters where she is lying in a large leather chair, blanket pulled up to her chin. In the hand of Sister Michael (Ruth Donnelly) is Sister Benedict's collar. The collar represents the yoke of religious life, but within this film it represents the yoke of religious power. Sister Benedict and Father O'Malley struggle for control over the school, but, more importantly, they are also struggling for power over knowledge. Sister Benedict first confronts Father O'Malley about writing letters behind her back.

O'MALLEY. What have I done now?

BENEDICT. You've been writing. You've been writing to mother general.

O'MALLEY. Oh?

BENEDICT. You've been going over my head. Yes I received that letter from her.

O'MALLEY. Well, I just wrote expressing my own opinion, sister. But I hope that hasn't brought this on.

BENEDICT. No. No. I'm just tired. But you actually considered tearing down St. Mary's and sending our children to St. Victor's?

O'MALLEY. That's right. I thought about it quite a bit. We have to face facts, Sister.

BENEDICT. Yes. Yes. I know what you mean, father. We've tried so hard not to face facts. But... but there must always be a St. Mary's.

O'MALLEY. Of course, of course, sister. Now just relax. Take it easy.

Sister Benedict is helpless and Father O'Malley is patronizing her. While she sits slumped in her chair, he sits upright and is leaning towards her, insinuating his dominion over her. If this scene were not performed with smiles and Bing Crosby playfully uttering his lines, the entire scene would be marked by a pall of abrasiveness. The text alone is full of anger and resentment, reflecting a true power struggle, yet the scene is played so softly that the doctor coming in is more of an emotional jolt than Sister Benedict asserting that Father O'Malley does not know what is best for St. Mary's.

In this same scene, Sister Benedict is lit from a side light, shadowing the right side of her face. Not only does this visual technique signal Sister Benedict's bleak future, but also, ironically, her acceptance of the inevitable logic of her situation. She must accept that her school is no longer suitable for teaching. In all of her scenes after she challenges Father O'Malley, from the fight on the playground until her farewell to the school, her face is shadowed by a light source shining from the right (even when she is standing in a window, looking outside during afternoon recess). During the first real verbal sparring match with Father O'Malley, the two of them lay out their views of the world and each has the opposite side of their face lit. Father O'Malley has his left side shadowed and Sister Benedict has her right side shadowed, exposing their opposing views.

Similarly, although Sister Benedict typically is framed within the scene on the left side of the screen, she is positioned in numerous ways within the space of the film in

terms of height. When she is with Father O'Malley, they start out as equals. Their height is the same; they typically both stand or sit when speaking to ensure equality. But as Sister Benedict's illness is revealed, more and more shots include Father O'Malley looming over her, another sign that she once was a woman of stature and respect and now she is slowly losing her place at the school. It is only when Patsy reveals she sabotaged her own scores in order to fail that we see Sister Benedict finally take precedence again and stand equally with Father O'Malley. Sister Benedict now has an insight into the situation which will give her the upper hand. Her assumption that her removal is based on her disagreement with Father O'Malley about Patsy failing will be resolved and she will be allowed to stay in power. Once again, Sister Benedict is as knowledgeable as Father O'Malley.

As Father O'Malley comes to understand Sister Benedict, he also realizes the importance of the school and the children to her. After Sister Benedict's fainting spell, Father O'Malley slowly starts to take control of the situation and is convinced by Dr. McKay (Rhys Williams) to mislead Sister Benedict. Instead of being honest with Sister Benedict, Dr. McKay goes to Father O'Malley to help find the answer to Sister Benedict's illness. Their first conspiratorial conversation occurs after Dr. McKay has examined Sister Benedict at the parish.

MCKAY. Now you won't forget, Father? You'll see that she gets down to the office tomorrow?

O'MALLEY. She has a mind of her own, you know, but I'll get her down there. Is this something serious?

MCKAY. Well, she's running a little temperature. You say she's had

these attacks before?

O'MALLEY. That's what I heard today, yes. I hope it's nothing serious, she's such a remarkable woman.

MCKAY. She certainly is. I could tell that the minute I walked into the room. Does she really believe that Bogardus is going to give that building. . .

O'MALLEY. Yes.

MCKAY. Well, I've heard of such things, but I've never come across it before. Not since I was a little boy and I wished for what I wanted for Christmas and got it.

O'MALLEY. It's sorta the same thing.

MCKAY. But when we grow up, we get practical. She's not very practical is she?

O'MALLEY. Ooh, she thinks she is.

MCKAY. What is she going to do when she doesn't get it?

O'MALLEY. You see, now she's got you worried.

MCKAY. Yes, she has. I'd hate to see her disillusioned.

Dr. McKay undermines Sister Benedict, despite his flattering lip service to her remarkable nature, by asking Father O'Malley to bring her down to his office the next morning. Father O'Malley recognizes the difficulty of Dr. McKay's request, reminding him that Sister Benedict has a mind of her own and can think for herself but ultimately exerting his authority over her by saying, "I'll get her down there." Father O'Malley, instead of Sister Benedict herself, is called upon to handle Sister Benedict's situation. Dr.

McKay seems skeptical about Sister Benedict's belief in prayer, saying it reminds him of wishing for toys at Christmas, and then calling her impractical. Dr. McKay treats Sister Benedict's unwavering faith in God and prayer by comparing her attitude to a child's belief in Santa Claus. The references to Sister Benedict shed light on her strong-will and independent nature, but Dr. McKay and Father O'Malley patronize her. They treat her as if she is a little child.

Sister Benedict is perceived by Father O'Malley and Dr. McKay as fragile, innocent, and impractical. They feel that she needs to be taken care of, thus the request to have Father O'Malley bring her down to the clinic and Dr. McKay's fear that she may become disillusioned if her prayers are not answered. The knowledge that something may be physically wrong with Sister Benedict is kept from her as if she could not handle the terrible news.

When her medical results are presented, they are not presented to her but to Father O'Malley. This scene happens after Sister Benedict has been given Mr. Bogardus' building, and the power of her *impractical* methods is proved to be effective. Dr. McKay is well aware of Sister Benedict's power at St. Mary's and he slowly twists Father O'Malley's arm to have her sent away from the school and, more specifically, his community. He is the outsider looking in on the tiny convent and he is fearful of the nun's authority. What if she prays for something more threatening than a simple building?

By manipulating Father O'Malley, Dr. McKay is able to save himself from the potential threat of a dominant woman and the community from a woman with power. By giving Father O'Malley the truth about Sister Benedict's condition, he puts Father O'Malley in the position to decide the fate of Sister Benedict. Dr. McKay even lies to

Sister Benedict and tells her that she is fine and healthy. He still feels that Sister Benedict's mental state is too fragile to handle the news of her illness and he advises Father O'Malley to have her sent away in order to get better, insisting that knowing about her illness would ruin her great spirit and cause her to become depressed.

Unbeknownst to him, Sister Benedict needs to be told the truth. Not knowing what's happening to her has dampened her spirits even more than Dr. McKay's fears would have. When Father O'Malley breaks the news to her, it is right after Sister Benedict has promised to make things easier for him in the next school year. She admits that they have had problems, specifically mentioning Patsy. When he tells her of her fate, Sister Benedict thinks she is being punished because she has disagreed with him, not because she is simply being transferred. She feels betrayed and bewildered, having turned to Father O'Malley for moral support on an issue that demanded special care.

O'MALLEY. You will be notified shortly that Sister Michael is going to be in charge here next year.

BENEDICT. Oh she. . . she'll be so happy. Will I. . .will. . .will I be her assistant?

O'MALLEY. It's only fair to tell you, sister, you're being transferred.

BENEDICT. It's going to be difficult to leave St. Mary's. But we shouldn't become too attached to any one place. Any other school may seem strange at first, but as long as I am around children I'll be happy. How do you know all this? Have you been writing Mother General again? Will I be here for graduation?

O'MALLEY. Yes, sister, of course.

By the end of the film, Father O'Malley finally shares with Sister Benedict the truth about her condition. He realizes that Dr. McKay was not really looking out for her best interests, because Dr. McKay does not understand the motivation behind Sister Benedict's liberated life and that she is an adult. Now that she is leaving, Father O'Malley feels he needs to finally do the right thing and stop hiding the truth of the matter from Sister Benedict. As he shares his knowledge with her, relief sweeps over Sister Benedict's face as she realizes her transfer was not because of Patsy. The certainty that she can one day return once her illness has subsided brings her out of her depression and gives her a newfound sense of direction. The knowledge that is shared with her allows her to once again become an assertive woman. But this knowledge is only given to her through a man, reminding her that she is still part of the man's world.

Sister Benedict is able to continue to be a strong, independent woman with the help of Father O'Malley. Despite her physical setback, she is a beautiful, mysterious religious woman with God watching over her, viewed as a threat by those outside the school but revered by those within. Sister Benedict is presented as holy and pure, the angelic nun. She holds her job outside of the home and works shoulder-to-shoulder with a man, giving hope to a new generation of women longing to leave their home life and find a place in the business world. The independent spirit of the nun is exhilarating and, as Peter Mullan will demonstrate in *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002), this independent pioneering nature is infectious to ambitious women in the 1940s and 1950s.

As the 1960s approached, the role of the woman in society was challenged by women in both America and Great Britain. In 1952, Elizabeth II became Queen of England, putting a woman in power once again and drawing on the strength and history

of Elizabeth I, one of the most powerful and influential women leaders England ever had. The position of the woman was changing but not all of it was for the better.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, women's sexual expression and the negative connotations associated with it were moved to the forefront of the Women's Movement. In 1960, the FDA finally approved birth control pills. This occurred the same year as the release of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which features the leading lady being brutally stabbed to death in a shower. Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) was a sexually active woman and her indiscretions were punished halfway through the film with her tragic end. Betty Friedan counteracted this negative image of the sexual woman by publishing her study on women, *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1961. She examines "the problem that has no name," and inspired women to question their place in the world. She explores the source of a woman's identity and offers solutions to understanding the society they live in. What are those television and magazine ads really saying about a woman's place? That they are to wear high heels and party frocks while cooking dinner, doing the laundry, and even vacuuming. Their place was in the home and they were to look as beautiful as possible for their man. Betty Friedan went on in 1966 to form the National Organization for Women (NOW). Women were starting to organize themselves and fight the one-sided social structure that had imprisoned them for so long.

The Catholic Church also had an eventful decade. Not only was the first Catholic President of the United States elected (John F. Kennedy, 1960), but Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council in 1962 to reassess the Catholic Church's position on the issues of race, gender, as well as the standard practices of the Church. Only a year later, Pope John XXIII died. Pope Paul VI was named the new pope in 1963, the same

year John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, and that same year, the Supreme Court ruled that The Lord's Prayer and Bible verses were no longer allowed to be recited in public schools.

With feminism on the rise and the Civil Rights Movement steadily gaining momentum behind Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it was time for these two groups to join forces. In 1963, Ralph Nelson's *Lilies of the Field* was released, which featured Sidney Poitier (Homer Smith) as the leading man and Lilia Skala (Mother Maria) as the leading nun. These two represent the dynamic struggle amongst women and African Americans to find equality in the white man's world. Within their struggle for social equality, Homer and Mother Maria must also overcome the gender biases or genderlessness of their perspectives. Homer wants to assert his male authority over Mother Maria, but within the Sisterhood he has no power over the women. He also struggles to overcome his lack of merit in the white man's world because he is a black man still thwarted by racial segregation. Mother Maria wants to assert her authority granted to her through her faith but cannot in a society where men run everything. They ultimately find Christian unity and racial harmony while, at the same time, acknowledging the importance of their gender specific roles. They come to accept each other's cultural backgrounds and find harmony between the genders.

Lilies of the Field paints a similar, yet more ingenious image of the nun than *The Bells of St. Mary's*. Visually, Mother Maria is the opposite of Sister Benedict. She is much older and plumper, as well as stern looking. She is hardly the image of the pious beauty, but a hardworking pioneer woman. Mother Maria and her girls have traversed harsh terrain and work in their gardens, which is reflected in their appearance.

As might be expected, Mother Maria's clothing is also not as glamorous as Sister Benedict's. When Mother Maria and the other nuns are working in their yard, they are dressed in drab black wool shirts and skirts, accessorized by an apron and straw hat. When they are in the house or on their way to church, they wear their full nun attire. Instead of just a simple black habit, they also wear a black scapular (T-shaped cloth that was positioned across the shoulders and down the middle, front and back of the torso) accompanied by a large white collar. They also wear a large cross, which rests right under their collar, the focal point of their outfit.

These heavy wool clothes look far from appropriate in the hot Arizona weather. The nuns and Mother Maria look out of place working on the land in their large stifling black clothing, especially when compared to Homer Smith and his light colored apparel. Several characters in the film refer to the women as incapable of working the land by themselves, which plays into a prevailing attitude of the postwar period of the 1950s that women should remain rooted in the home. Betty Friedan, during her research on "The Happy Housewife Heroine" in *The Feminine Mystique*, introduces the general attitude of society forced onto women by magazines like *McCall's*:

. . .the only passion, the only pursuit, the only goal a woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man. It is crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit? In the magazine image, women do no work except housework and work to keep their bodies beautiful and to get and keep a man. (36)

Mother Maria does not subscribe to these modern standards of dress or the need to keep a man. She is a tough woman with grand ideas. She will build a chapel and work the land because "it is God's will," not because society has told her to. Her habit and her faith give her the power to do these things and allow her to inspire the people in the community, instead of following the magazine's proposal that it is only through the pursuit of a man that a woman can amount to anything. This also circumvents the idea presented by *McCall's* and Friedan that a woman is only the sum of her housework.

Not only does Mother Maria put her faith in God and the power of prayer, like Sister Benedict, but she also takes action for herself. Sister Benedict simply waited around for Mr. Bogardus to come to her and give her his building, but Mother Maria goes out and finds people who can further her goal (to build a chapel and later a school and a hospital), urging them to help her through a wide variety of methods.

Mother Maria recognizes that she is in need of a man to help her achieve her goals and, miraculously, God sends Homer Smith her way. Immediately Mother Maria starts to use him. First she takes his name away, renaming him "Homer Schmidt" instead of Smith. She uses her German language to show superiority over him, but later has it turned back on her when Homer offers to help the nuns learn English. She is cautious of what he is teaching them and looks for any signs that he might be playing games.

Through the use of language, Mother Maria plays ignorant of Homer's desire to be paid and leave. Instead, she slowly prods him into doing more work. Never one to ask a person for help or even say thank you, Mother Maria makes off-handed comments to people in order to further her mission. When Homer finally has an opportunity to leave, Mother Maria demands that she and another nun go with him to the Ashton Company,

Inc., a local construction company. When she goes inside to speak with Mr. Ashton. Homer wanders out into the yard to examine some of the construction equipment in order to see if he can earn a few extra bucks in Ashton's employment. As he is looking, Mr. Ashton comes out to speak with him. Mother Maria knows Mr. Ashton will push the right buttons in Homer--namely, his pride--and he does.

ASHTON. Hey, boy. You Schmidt?

HOMER. Well, that's what they call me. My name is Homer Smith.

ASHTON. Are you the fella who's supposed to build a chapel for these nuns? They must be kidding.

HOMER. Why?

ASHTON. Well, they tell me you're their contractor.

HOMER. So. . .

ASHTON. You a contractor?

HOMER. Well, what's wrong with that?

ASHTON. Well, um, what kind of contractor?

HOMER. Independent.

ASHTON. You a local man? I don't remember us doing business before.

HOMER. I'm out of state.

ASHTON. How did they get mixed up with you? How did they ever talk you into a thing like this?

HOMER. Nobody talked me into anything.

ASHTON. Well, they conned me out of some adobe brick and some lumber. I figured I could write that off.

Insulted by being called a "boy" and questioned as a professional contractor, Homer feels the need to show Ashton up and thus he decides to continue helping Mother Maria as she planned. Homer's masculine and racial pride are assaulted by Mr. Ashton. By calling him "boy," Mr. Ashton refers to Homer as a child but also as a slave. But Homer turns the insult back around, calling Mr. Ashton a boy and then offering his services twice a week as a way to pay for food. After Mr. Ashton has given him a job, Homer is ready to go back to the house.

Mother Maria plays coy, as if she had nothing to do with what transpired. Homer tells her to stop acting cute, because she does not want it to look like she is fighting with her contractor in front of the man who just questioned his status. Mother Maria never asks for anything directly from people, instead she plants the seed in the mind of the people she wants to help her. But her biggest problem is that she ignores that other people are involved in the successes she experiences. Instead of thanking Homer when he brings them groceries so that they can eat more than an egg, she thanks God. She tells Homer that he merely could not help himself. She is successful in obtaining food for the sisters, but she does not acknowledge Homer for helping them.

Once she has lured people into helping her, Mother Maria barks orders at them, instead of politely telling them how to do something. But her direct demands backfire and almost lose her the chapel she so adamantly wants to build. After Homer has brought back more groceries, she is furious over having been rejected by every organized group that she wrote to for help building the chapel. Not knowing how to react, she takes out her anger on Homer.

MARIA. Why do you buy things to eat we do not need?

HOMER. Now just a minute. You know you are very large on religion and all the rest of it, but you don't even know how to accept a gift from somebody without making them feel small. Small, you follow?

MARIA. Poor man. His feelings is hurt.

HOMER. I'm not twisting your arm for any big thank yous, but I'm through feeling small. I've got all the patience in the world. All the patience in the world.

MARIA. Then why do you work on the road gang when you should build the chapel?

HOMER. Where are the bricks?

MARIA. They will come. Maybe not tonight. But there's others. You could be busy raking and planting trees.

HOMER. We had this contract; you failed to keep your part.

MARIA. I failed because I put my faith in people, instead of in God.

HOMER. Forget it. It was an invisible contract any way. I don't believe in it.

MARIA. Who are you not believing? Hmmm? Somebody passing through that way? Me, I come 8000 miles to this place. You cry about a few bricks that are not here when you want them. Do you know what we went through to get to this place? You will not stand in the way of this chapel. No. It will be done.

HOMER. Well good luck, Charlie, and you deal me out. Yeah. You know that stuff you wear? You think it's a uniform that makes you some sort

of a cop or something laying down the law. Throwing your weight around. You sound like one of those old war movies. A regular Hitler.

Well, you get yourself another boy, huh.

Homer leaves after this, abandoning the nuns and Mother Maria with only a small foundation for the chapel built. This argument is the turning point for both Homer and Mother Maria, which lays all of their problems out on the table. Mother Maria has always put her faith in God and gotten what she needed to live. She prayed for help leaving East Germany and escaping Communist rule. She prayed for safe passage to Arizona where she would be able to start a new life in a free country, and we know that she has prayed for someone to help her build a chapel. Yet, God is not providing her with the supplies to build the chapel and she does not understand why. Her optimism is wearing thin and she is angry that she thought asking men for help would bring about change. Her anger against men is taken out on Homer, which is why she tells him that not even he will stand in the way of the chapel being built even though Homer is the reason it is starting to get done in the first place.

Similar to Sister Benedict, Mother Maria needs a man's help in order to achieve her ultimate goal. She needs Homer and his charity, but she is treated as if she is a child by Homer and the people of the town, especially Mr. Ashton. Her dreams of building the chapel, and eventually the school and hospital, seem outlandish and impractical like Sister Benedict's prayer for Mr. Bogardus' building. Mother Maria is stubborn and determined. Her abrasive personality rubs the community the wrong way until they realize someone is willing to help her build her chapel. Once Homer starts the work on the chapel, the community begins providing the material and the labor to achieve this

tremendous task. All of this is also done without the help of the mean white man, Mr. Ashton. Mother Maria recognizes her inability to build the chapel alone and depends on Homer to fulfill her dream. Rising about racial prejudice, men and women come together to accomplish the task at hand. Together, they challenge the status quo.

On the other hand, Homer only wants to be appreciated for his good deeds. He wants recognition for his thoughtfulness and hard work, which Mother Maria does not give him. Now that he finally is willing to help her, she cannot provide him with what he needs to get the job done, and, in fact, still feels the need to order him around on other tasks that amount to little safe opportunities for Mother Maria to assert her authority. Homer is a free-spirit who wants no man or woman as his boss. Whether his attitude is a rebellion against his just wanting to be as free as possible (which may be related to racial history and dynamics in the United States) is unclear, but he resents the way Mother Maria treats him while somehow feeling obliged to help her.

Homer does identify the link between the nun's power and her clothing. He compares Mother Maria to a police officer, whom also uses a uniform to assert his authority. Homer calls into question the significance of her clothing and that perhaps that is what gives her the power she wields so freely. Being a woman of God, serving Him and dedicating her life to Him, she acts as His spokeswoman, giving orders in His name. Homer, though, feels she behaves like a dictator serving a selfish need instead of a humble and caring creature, which he thought nuns were supposed to be as servants of God.

Homer and Mother Maria are set up as sparring partners. They are each other's equal, yet one is more adept at building things and the other is better suited at running

things. Whenever the two of them are sitting in the house, they are across from each other at the heads of the table. They face each other when they speak. When they ride in the car together, Mother Maria sits in the front seat with Homer. When they arrive at church, Homer is on Mother Maria's arm. When they speak using Bible passages, they sit next to each other responding verse for verse until Homer, frustrated, gives in. Mother Maria is never made a lesser creature in comparison to Homer, and vice versa.

Their equality is not only set in their actions but in their place in society. Women and African Americans fought for equality in society, but in this community where there is only one white man, the woman and the black man produce great things. Race and gender are not issues to either of them in the grand scheme of things. They build a Utopia. Together they create a world where people of all races and genders can co-exist happily.

The two of them hold their own and stand up to each other. Mother Maria does, at times, appear to have the upper hand, but after Homer walks out on them, it seems as if he had the upper hand after all. Mother Maria regrets treating him badly and mopes around the chapel foundation, hoping that his station wagon will once again drive up their dirt road. He also asserts his authority when the townspeople start working on the chapel and he sulks over not being able to do it by himself. Mother Maria almost chases off all the workers, but Homer is able to make them stay and continue working. Where one fails, the other succeeds and in the end they need each other.

Mother Maria's power over Homer subsides by the end of the film. Homer no longer feels bound to her in any way. The chapel is done and it is time for him to leave her. There is an understanding that Homer has helped fulfill her prayers and he is now

right in the eyes of God and Mother Maria. He has fulfilled his part of the unspoken contract and created something that is meaningful and will last, which gives him satisfaction. He has helped her learn how to speak English, removing the language barrier. Mother Maria can finally pronounce chapel as “chapel” in stead of “schapel,” and Homer finally gets his “thank you,” even if it is accidental. As they sing their celebratory song of "Amen," Homer gets up and leaves and Mother Maria stops singing, realizing what is going on. She listens to Homer singing out the story of Jesus’s life as he stands up and slowly walks out the door. As the song comes to an end and Homer's car engine starts, a cut to Mother Maria reveals her mouthing “A-men”: an end to her prayer, an end to her experience, and an end to the film.

Mother Maria and Sister Benedict present ambivalent images of the nun. She is faithful, depending upon God no matter how fantastical the request may be. Yet, she needs a man to help her on her way to success. Sister Benedict needed Father O’Malley for moral support, as well as the knowledge about her condition in order to confidently leave the school. Mother Maria needed Homer for physical strength and as an example of how to be a better person. He built her chapel for her and also provided her the friendship she needed to help her community prosper. They are strong women, regardless of their dependence on men.

Both threaten other male characters in the film (Dr. McKay and Mr. Ashton) because of their strength and conviction. Sister Benedict takes it upon herself to learn boxing in order to help one of her students defend himself. She teaches herself, in order to gain the knowledge to pass on to her students, ultimately showing Father O'Malley that her knowledge about the world is just as good as his. Mother Maria traveled from

Germany to Arizona, representing the image of the old western pioneers forging a new world (Sullivan, 64). She works hard, just as Homer does, in order to provide for her community spiritually. Mother Maria is ready to settle down, while Homer is still wandering, looking for his final home.

The nun in postwar cinema is a hardworking, pious woman whose faith in God is unshakeable. She works for the good of the community instead of only thinking of herself. She follows a moral code built on equality. Sister Benedict wants to do what is right for Patsy, but she does not want to break the rules even though deep down she knows Patsy should pass. Mother Maria does not turn away Homer because he is of a different race; instead she embraces his willingness to help them.

Nearly every nun film that came out between 1945 and 1969, such as *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947), *Heaven Knows Mr. Allison* (Huston, 1957), *The Nun's Story* (Zinnemann, 1959), *The Sound of Music* (Wise, 1962), *The Trouble with Angels* (Lupino, 1966), *La Religieuse* (Rivette, 1966), and *Change of Habit* (Graham, 1969), presented a similar image of the nun as a free-spirited and independent woman looking to make a change and putting her faith in God and in prayer. These characters also depend on men and often clash with men outside of their community. Characters like Dr. McKay and Mr. Shelton fear the nuns and the power they seem to have in the community. The leading actor rarely threatens the nun's status and often turns out to be the one who helps her achieve her goals.

Most nuns traveled or would be traveling at some point in the film, as a reminder of the great expanses many have traversed in order to aid those who needed them. This early image of the nun is angelic, rising above the social standards of the day, positioning

her as a representative for the new, independent woman the Women's Rights Movement was working towards. She does not hold herself to anyone or anything other than her personal beliefs, not allowing a man to completely control her mind, body, and spirit. The nun rejects the home and stands as an equal to a man and still live a moral and upright life.

In these films, the nun is able to change society. She runs the schools and pioneers the frontier in order to bring religion to those who want it. Her confidence and independence bring about changes that the men in the films are unable to accomplish or do not think about doing. As an old World War II saying went, "She's making history, working for victory!" Both Mother Maria and Sister Benedict are reminded of their importance through the appreciation of the community. They are working for the victory of their beliefs and their authority.

This image of the angelic nun will be shaken as the world turns and corruption looms on the horizon during the seventies and eighties. Women will have more freedom to express themselves so how will the nun, as a champion of the independent woman, fare during the tumultuous uprising of sexual expression?

Chapter Two
"Sin Can Be Caught As Easily As the Plague!"
1970-1989

1970 - *Eisenstadt vs. Baird* rules that the right to privacy includes an unmarried person's right to use contraceptives. Four students at Kent State University in Ohio slain by National Guardsmen. *Patton* wins the 43rd Annual Academy Awards.

1971 - Twenty-sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution lowers voting age to 18. *The Devils* released in England.

1972 - The Watergate Scandal. Supreme Court rules that the death penalty is unconstitutional. Title IX of the Education Amendments bans sex discrimination in schools. First feminist film festivals emerge in the United States and Great Britain. *The Godfather* wins Best Motion Picture at the 45th Annual Academy Awards.

1973 - U.S. bombing of Cambodia ends, marking the official halt to 12 years of combat activity in Southeast Asia. *Roe vs. Wade* legalizes a woman's right to choose, which overrides all anti-abortion laws in the United States. *Notes on Women's Cinema* published by Claire Johnston at the Edinburgh Film Festival.

1974 - Richard Nixon resigns and Vice President Gerald Ford (R) steps into power, granting "full, free, and absolute pardon" to ex-president Nixon.

1976 - The Supreme Court rules that the death penalty is not inherently cruel or unusual and is a constitutionally acceptable form of punishment. Jimmy Carter (D) elected president of the United States. Steadicam first used in *Bound for Glory*.

1977 - First woman Episcopal priest ordained. *Star Wars* released.

1978 - Pope Paul VI dies at 80. Pope John Paul I elected to office, dies unexpectedly at 65 after only 34 days in office. Pope John Paul II is elected. Jim Jones' followers commit mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana.

1980 - Supreme Court upholds limits on federal aid for abortions. Three U.S. nuns and a lay worker found shot in El Salvador. John Lennon murdered in New York City. Smallpox eradicated. Ronald Reagan (R) elected president of the United States.

1981 - President Reagan and Pope John Paul II wounded by a gunman, two months apart. Sandra Day O'Connor is the first woman on the Supreme Court. AIDS first identified. *Chariots of Fire* wins Best Motion Picture at the 54th Annual Academy Awards.

1983 - Pope John Paul II signs new Roman Catholic code incorporating changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council.

1984 - United States and the Vatican exchange diplomats after 116-year hiatus. Italy and the Vatican agree to end Roman Catholicism as state religion. Ronald Reagan re-elected.

1985 - The Supreme Court bars public school teachers from parochial schools. *Agnes of God* is released.

1986 - Space shuttle *Challenger* explodes after launch, killing all seven aboard. Major nuclear accident at Soviet Union's Chernobyl power station alarms world. Three Lutheran church groups in U.S. set to merge.

1988 - George Bush (R) elected president of the United States.

1989 - Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini declares Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* offensive and sentences him to death. The Exxon Valdez Disaster. Thousands of demonstrators killed in Tiananmen Square by Chinese Government forces. After 28 years, the Berlin Wall is torn down by the people. Dalai Lama wins Nobel Peace Prize.

The 1970s was a decade pregnant with political and social upheaval. Political institutions were viewed with hostility and suspicion, with the Vietnam and Korean Wars still fresh in people's minds. The Catholic Church was rife with turmoil when in 1978, Pope John Paul I, having been elected to office, died unexpectedly at 65 after only 34 days in office. Birth control was approved by the FDA, which morally compromised women in the eye of the Church. "Girls were being warned in sex education classes that using tampons was the equivalent of a loss of virginity" (Collins, 422). As the late 1960s turned into the 1970s, *Hair* was hitting it big on Broadway "with its celebration of nudity, draft card burning, and oral and anal sex" (Collins, 422). Sexual expression was in full swing in both America and Great Britain. Women were challenging the length of their skirts and rejecting girdles and stockings for tights. They straightened their hair and threw away the curlers (Collins, 422). Liberation from the constraints of the old 1950s housewifery led women to explore their bodies. Through fashion, sex, and music, the women of the budding seventies were changing their image. And so was the film industry.

As a result of the dismantling of the studio system, independent film was sparking the interest of millions of theatergoers and filmmakers were pushing the limits of censorship. *Midnight Cowboy*, a film that deals with prostitution and homosexuality, won the 1969 Academy Award for Best Motion Picture and John Schlesinger won the award for Best Director. It was the first film with an X-rating to ever win an Academy Award. In 1970, a year after half a million people flocked to a small town in upstate New York to celebrate peace, love and understanding, director Robert Altman let political satire explode onto the scene when he released his social commentary on the Korean and

Vietnam wars, *M*A*S*H*, at the Cannes Film Festival. That same year, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (Meyers, 1970), co-scripted by film critic Roger Ebert, exploited the cynical, often bisexual, world of the music industry, capitalizing on Russ Meyer's usual brand of sexploitation film (*Wild Gals of the Naked West*, *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*). And in 1971, a film sporting the tag line, "Being the adventures of a young man whose principal interests are rape, ultra-violence and Beethoven," shocked viewers with glamorized violence and disturbing sexuality. Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of Anthony Burgess' novel *A Clockwork Orange*, depicted a futuristic Britain with roaming gangs of violently inclined young men who have no respect for women. It is into this violently sexual world that Ken Russell broke the mold of virginal nuns with a new sexualized nun in his 1971 film *The Devils*.

Between 1963 and 1973, the sexual exploitation of women in film was common, and nuns were no exception to the rule. *The Devils* paved the way for several other disturbing films dealing with the sexual behavior of nuns. In 1973, Domenico Paolella directed *The Story of the Cloistered Nun* and in 1974, Sergio Grieco directed *The Sinful Nuns of Saint Valentine*. Even Monty Python jumped on the horny nun train with their version of the seductive sisters attempted to molest Sir Lancelot in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Gilliam and Jones, 1975). These images were in response to "the growing strength and demands of women in real life, spear-headed by women's liberation, obviously provoke a backlash in commercial film. . .with the substitution of violence and sexuality (a poor second) for romance, there was less need for exciting and interesting women; any bouncing nymphet whose curves looked good in catsup would do" (Haskell, 232-234).

Actresses were struggling to stay afloat. No longer was an actress bound by a studio to keep her in the public eye, instead she had to start choosing her pictures wisely, because one wrong move could leave her career in ruins. Many of the biggest actresses were fortunate if they made at least one film a year. "Actresses like Vanessa Redgrave and Julie Christie, Jane Fonda and Mia Farrow, were no longer mythic idols" (Haskell, 325). These women no longer had a stereotypical role to play on the screen. They no longer had to continually play the *femme fatale*; they could play a loving wife in one film and a seductive secretary in the next. Yet, in order to capture the attention of the masses, "their offscreen antics had to be downright revolutionary to do so much as raise an eyebrow. In deliberately refusing to marry the fathers of their children, Mia Farrow and Vanessa Redgrave were applauded, or ignored, for doing what Ingrid Bergman had been ostracized for only ten years before" (Haskell, 325).

Molly Haskell's twofold theory that women are either portrayed as virgins or whores was in evidence in the 1970s and 1980s with Russell's *The Devils* and Norman Jewison's *Agnes of God*. Nuns are overtly represented as whores or demonic during this time, rebuking the saintly actions of nuns like Sister Benedict and Mother Maria and turning to sex and the rejection of Church laws. But what is even more interesting is that the nuns are robbed of their virginity while they are nuns, either through forceful exorcisms or naïve beliefs about God. Sex is integrated into their lifestyle and the chaste nun is forcibly raped even though she is the bride of Christ. Their sexuality is reinforced through their religious beliefs and ruins their angelic nature. They are tangible creatures, unlike the nuns of the previous decade, being touched by men and their sinful ways and not by the holy hand of God.

With *The Devils*, Ken Russell not only pushed the envelope with his edgy subversive style of filmmaking but also with his newly sexualized and perverted nun. *The Devils* examines the questions, "Once women's sexual desires are released after having been severely oppressed, how is it possible to contain them?" The film is based on the novel *The Devils of Loudon*, which tells the story of a group of seventeenth century French nuns gone crazy in their convent who go after a priest, proclaiming him to be the anti-Christ. The first time Russell introduces the viewer to the nuns of Loudon, they are climbing up the white tiled walls in order to see Father Grandier (Oliver Reed) as he leads a funeral procession. The nuns are obsessed with Father Grandier because he is a handsome man and they have heard stories of his sexual exploits with the women of the church.

Sister Jeanne (Vanessa Redgrave) catches the nuns clambering up the walls and reprimands them, punishing Sister Agnes (Judith Paris) for leading the girls into temptation. This gesture is hypocritical on the part of Sister Jeanne because she then sneaks through a small black door and watches the procession from a tiny barred window on the ground. When Father Grandier comes into view, she has a type of spasmodic episode, which causes her to have a vision of Father Grandier coming towards her over a lake. She then washes his feet with her long hair, while the rest of the nuns in the vision laugh at her for having a grotesque hump on her back and thinking that this grand figure would find her attractive. The first image of Sister Jeanne in the vision does not reveal the hump. She looks pretty, but once the hump is revealed while she washes his feet, the viewers are immediately repelled by its presence. It is revealed slowly, protruding out of her white gown and it is naked, forcing the viewer to confront it head-on instead of

covered up. Once the hump is revealed, the other nuns who are in the vision mock Sister Jeanne for being so ugly. Sister Jeanne is the pivotal player among the nuns and will be the driving force behind the outrageous events that occur in Loudon.

Russell sexualizes Father Grandier in order to make Grandier's transformation from sexual sinner to reformed man more powerful. The sisters revert from sexually frustrated, yet virginal nuns, to overt sexual sinners. This change in their character makes Father Grandier's execution an inversion of the idea that women should be punished for tempting men. In *The Devils*, women are not tempting men, men are tempting women. Instead of punishing a promiscuous woman for her indecent desires, a promiscuous man is punished. Even though he has changed his ways, Grandier can not escape his past sexual exploits. He is burned alive before the town because he was said to have indecent encounters with these nuns, when the truth of the matter is that he never had any exploits with the nuns. The nuns lie about their sexual encounters with Father Grandier and tout themselves as victims.

The nuns in this convent are Ursaline nuns. The Ursalines were originally formed to help educate young girls. They were respected as tough, straightforward women. The Ursaline nuns of *The Devils* are hardly respectable and they do not wear the typical black habit associated with the Ursaline nuns. Sister Jeanne's attire feels decidedly off-kilter from the attire we see the female sidekicks of Cardinal Richelieu (Christopher Logue) wearing. These women are dressed all in black with a tight headdress and a faint white headpiece. They never talk and only serve to carry or push the Cardinal from place to place. Sister Jeanne's robes are white except for a large black cross on the front of her scapula. Her robes do not hint at the feminine figure as the robes of Sister Benedict do in

The Bells of St. Mary's (McCarey, 1945). Unlike the nuns in earlier films, Sister Jeanne and her order reject their habits and revert to full or partial nudity. This is the first time, but certainly not the last, that nuns are portrayed as sexually debauched creatures capable of the foulest sexual acts, whether they are naked or fully clothed in their religious garments.

While Sister Jeanne is wandering through the halls of the convent, she hears a commotion in one of the rooms. As she peeks around the corner, the other sisters in the order are reenacting Father Grandier's secret marriage. One nun is dressed as Father Grandier and another as Madeleine (Gemma Jones); meanwhile the rest of the nuns are singing, dancing, and giggling around them. The two impersonators are hoisted onto a bed, pretend to kiss, and are carried off to their wedding night. Another nun begs Sister Agnes to make this stop, but being evil and vindictive, she allows it to go on in order to spite Sister Jeanne. This wicked, vicious behavior is such a radical departure from the traditional vision of the nun. It strongly suggests that any person kept in a cloister without sex becomes morally depraved, especially a woman.

Sister Jeanne is typically framed with vertical lines somewhere in the scene. Sometimes a barred window or shadows on the walls reinforce the theme of captivity and her inability to escape the life she has been forced into. Sister Jeanne is trapped in the convent because she is unfit to be part of society. Her family felt her life would be better suited to God since she is physically deformed. Many of the girls in Sister Jeanne's convent are there because they were forced there by their families and not because they wanted to devote themselves to Christ. In an attempt to protect her sanctuary, Sister Jeanne rejects Madeleine, a woman who wants to dedicate her life to God.

Her physical ailments are not the only problem with Sister Jeanne. The clarity of her mental state comes into question as her visions become more perverse. When she is not in her robes, she is committing grotesque sexual acts with Father Grandier in visions. It is only when Father Mignon shows up instead of Father Grandier to be the convent's spiritual leader that Sister Jeanne snaps and starts raving like a lunatic about how Father Grandier is a spirit that comes to her in her private quarters.

Once these lies have been uttered, Sister Jeanne is no longer visually barred with vertical lines but becomes the central visual icon. She is put on trial and is the focal point of the demon's carnal atrocities. Sister Jeanne is also the central source of entertainment to the townspeople and even the royal court. The townspeople are gathered on the other side of the barred entrance and they watch, laughing, as the trial proceeds. Later in the film, the royal court of France comes to view the insane nuns and they have a few laughs at the expense of the nuns. The gaze is not only from the viewer watching Sister Jeanne on screen, but everyone in the film watches her as well. Like Sister Benedict and Mother Maria, Sister Jeanne is the pivotal mover in the film. She is put in a tight spot and everyone looks to her for an answer or a solution, like Sister Benedict with St. Mary's School needing to be moved to a better building and Mother Maria with the supplies she needs for building her chapel. She is expected to act in a decisive manner that will help resolve the central conflict, but Sister Jeanne fuels the conflict instead of resolving it.

In contrast to the films of the 1940s and 1950s, in the 1970s romantic independence for the nun in film is over. The impractical and innocent ideas of the nuns, such as building chapels and praying for new school buildings, are no longer idealized; instead a dark shadow falls over the cloisters. Nuns no longer enter the sisterhood

because they want to help better their community, but rather they are forced there by their families for straining their finances if they have too many children or for posing a threat to the morality of society. Sister Benedict and Mother Maria chose their life of servitude to God. In *The Devils*, nuns did not make the choice to serve God, but rather they had it forced upon them and were never given the chance at a normal life - thus they will be ruined in the end. Hamlet told Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery," because he says he does not love her. Ophelia is a sexual temptation for Hamlet and so he tells her to go to the place where women who are temptresses should go, the nunnery. *The Devils* utilizes this idea by making the nunnery a whore house. These nuns are destroyed because they do not have the faith Sister Benedict and Mother Maria have or the pure dedication to God and the well-being of their community. They revert to sexual indiscretions and abandon the chaste life.

Their inner bankruptcy is signaled by their appearance. Sister Jeanne is by no means a beauty comparable to Ingrid Bergman in *The Bells of St. Mary's*, but what we witness here is an outward reflection of their moral soul through their looks. Sister Jeanne is a troubled soul, capable of immoral accusations and lies and these flaws manifest physically in her deformed body, which forces her head to be tilted. The gaze of the viewers is directed at her is like the gaze of a spectator at a circus freak. She is repulsive to look at but we are compelled to see more of this grotesque creature, and in the end the gazer gets exactly what he or she desires.

Due to their inability to escape their prison because of the barred windows and their own vows, the carnal appetite of the nuns starts to run wild. Sister Jeanne is the first nun seen participating in sexual behavior, outside of her radical visions. After she has

written a letter to Father Grandier requesting that he come to head her institution, Sister Jeanne is seen and heard masturbating. Sister Agnes is listening outside the door. Sister Jeanne then finds pleasure in flogging herself afterwards as Sister Agnes hysterically laughs outside the door. The viewer is forced to align with Sister Agnes as we watch the crippled nun pleasure herself, because the viewer experiences the same feelings from the scenario as Sister Agnes. It is visually mystifying but also unsettling, akin to rubbernecking at a car crash or a train wreck. The viewer cannot turn away from this perverse spectacle. Sister Jeanne lacks the physical allure required to make this scene sexually stimulating, but the vision of an authority figure, let alone a religious one, committing a scandalous act indulges the voyeuristic nature of spectatorship.

In the early nun films, such as *The Bells of St. Mary's* or *The Nun's Story*, the nun's sexuality tempted the viewer. It was withheld, hinted at in little ways, like the cinching of the habit around the waist or the addition of makeup to accentuate her facial features. *The Devils* parades the nuns' sexuality before us, demanding that we react, demanding that we feel shameful for watching her violate herself. Sister Jeanne's masturbation and flogging assault the audience's standards on sex and violence, pairing the two within one image, like Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), where sadistic pleasure accompanies Alex's (Malcolm McDowell) every day activities of rape and brutal beatings of innocent men and women.

From this point on, the sexual behavior not only of Sister Jeanne, but of all the nuns in the convent, goes completely berserk. After Sister Jeanne has told Father Mignon about her visions of Father Grandier, a witch hunter is called in to examine the case. Sister Jeanne's credibility and sexuality are called into question. When the members of

the council sitting before her start to panic over the mockery that is occurring, Sister Jeanne realizes she must continue with her charade or be sentenced to death for treason. She starts telling lies about her sexual encounters with Father Grandier, instead of confessing that he has never stepped foot in the convent. In order to find her evidence truly convincing, the council calls in the two local doctors to confirm her virginity. A screen is pulled up as a large phallic object is taken out of sight and subsequently thrust into Sister Jeanne. There are screams from behind the screen where Sister Jeanne is being violated and as the doctors emerge with blood stained hands, they proclaim that she has indeed been penetrated. They say she is not a virgin, but as the scene unfolds the images tell another story. When the scene cuts to Sister Jeanne lying on the floor, her exposed thighs reveal large smears of blood. It is true she has been penetrated, but not by Father Grandier or any demons. Her deflowering is caused the men inspecting her. Sister Jeanne's sexual desire is expressed in her fantasies of Father Grandier, but the examination of her vagina is a violation of her body and that desire. It is not representative of her relationship with God. Upon realizing that her body and mind have been defiled, Sister Jeanne starts to fight against them as the council decides to inject her with a disgusting concoction designed to rid her womb of demon spawn.

As Sister Jeanne is raped by the doctor's instruments, the rest of the nuns start fighting everyone present: the guards and the people. For this they are taken out to the woods to suffer the penalty of death for committing treason against the church and the crown. Father Barre (Michael Gothard) saves them, proclaiming God has told him that these women are merely fevered with exposure to the Devil. He instructs them how to behave:

BARRE. Stop! God has revealed to me that these good sisters are riddled with a fever that torments the body of sister Jeanne. The evil in her flesh has infected the young and innocent bodies of her charges. Sin can be caught as easily as the plague.

DE LAUBARDEMONT. If Father Barre is right, my good sisters, you may save yourselves yet. You will not be the first to see the light.

BARRE. You are tainted. The devil is in your flesh. The evil spirit of Grandier has taken possession of your souls. Now you resist him but surely he will have his way. You will scream!

NUNS. Yes!

BARRE. You will blaspheme!

NUNS. Yes!

BARRE. You will no longer be responsible for your actions!

NUNS. Yes!

BARRE. Denounce your devilish master Grandier! 'Cause we will save you!

Their downfall, as well as Sister Jeanne's, is brought about by men encouraging these cloistered women to be as perverted as possible. Once the nuns are back at the convent, they turn the altar room into a massive orgy and the nuns seduce the men of the town, men of the cloth, and men of the crown. They tear off their clothes, flailing around like mad women. The sequence culminates in one of the most religiously offensive scenes in film history.

As the nuns riot, fellating candles and men, they rush up to the altar, naked, where an enormous, grotesque and surreal crucifix hangs. They take it down and lay it on the ground and the nuns start to use it as a masturbatory tool. They thrust themselves on Christ's genital mass, rub themselves on his face, and use every extremity to bring themselves to a sexual climax. Viewers are again aligned with Father Mignon who climbs to a high ledge in the chapel, looks down at the nuns using the crucifix as a sexual toy and he begins masturbating, climaxing in a montage of extreme close ups cut with quick zooms and loud disorienting music. The gaze of both Father Mignon and the audience is focused on the spectacle of the sacrilegious nuns and their immoral actions.

Because they are performed by nuns, these actions taken by the characters are much more shocking. These are religious people who were supposed to dedicate themselves to God and be chaste, longing to help those who need aid. Yet the viewer is presented with sexually depraved prisoners who could not care less about their supposed vocation. They embrace God sexually rather than spiritually. When Father Grandier is dragged through the streets of Loudon and is forced to stop in front of the convent, he says to the nuns, "I can only ask that God will forgive them" and he is rebuked. Father Grandier is martyred for the sins of the nuns. He forgives them for their lies, but Sister Jeanne throws another tantrum and they are forced back into the convent by the guards.

When Madeleine asks Father Grandier why these nuns have chosen him to be the focus of their accusations, he can only speculate that their unhappiness has caused them to create a fantasy world where somehow he became united with their lust.

MADELEINE. Have you offended this woman in any way?

GRANDIER. I have never seen her.

MADELEINE. Then why has she picked on you?

GRANDIER. Oh, I don't know. Secluded women they give themselves to God, but something remains which cries out to be given to man. I mean, can you imagine being woken in the night by a dream, a dream of your childhood or your lover or even the vision of a good meal? Now this is sin and so you must take up your little whip and start scourging your body. This is discipline, but pain is sensuality and in its vortex spin images of horror and lust. Our beloved sister in Jesus seems to have set her mind on me. There's no reason. A piece of gossip perhaps overhead and magnified. Anything found in the desert of a frustrated life can bring hope and with hope comes love and with love comes hate. So I possess this woman. May God help her in her misery and unhappiness.

The image of the nun as independent, faithful and a do-gooder is torn down. Father Grandier rejects the idea of Madeleine becoming a nun. He tells her not to, because she is more pious and God-fearing than Sister Jeanne, who runs the convent. The nunnery is not for good, morally correct women, but, Father Grandier, like Hamlet, suggests, for whores and female burdens on society. The nuns are caught in a Catch-22. They are continually forced into questionable positions by the dominating male society. When Sister Jeanne tries to confess that she has wrongly accused Father Grandier, Father Barre says it is the demon speaking from within her and that it must be handled. A close-up of Baron De Laubardemont and the moaning that ensues allude to Father Barre abusing his position and raping this poor confused woman. The men in the film do

nothing but further the moral depravity of the nuns and they turn the convent from a place of worship into a whorehouse.

For these nuns there is no way out. Their carnal desires have been released upon society and the only way to save society is to lock them away inside the convent. Prayer will not help them because they do not treat prayer as a means of salvation. They put their faith in men (Father Grandier, Father Mignon, Father Barre, Baron De Labaurdemont) instead of in God, which, as Mother Maria points out in *Lilies of the Field*, will not help solve anything. Male society sees the nuns in *The Devils* as the victims of one man's, or demon's, sexual urges and therefore are above the law. They are not punished and killed because some superior entity has taken advantage of their weak womanly bodies. It is Father Grandier, who is able to physically defend himself, who is punished and killed. These nuns are simply deranged, sexual captives without faith and alienated from the world. They are not part of society. Instead, they are sinful creatures capable of animalistic acts.

This commentary on the women of the day holds out little hope for them in the future. Now that their sexual urges have been explored, there is no way to reclaim their innocence. Sister Jeanne wants to confess that she lied about Father Grandier, but Baron De Labaurdemont refuses to let her. Her guilt leads her to attempt suicide. They have done wrong, in God's eyes and in their hearts, but they cannot turn back because they would also be executed if it was proven they had lied. The nun represents the trapped woman of Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique*, but now they are free to express themselves. However, with this new sexual freedom comes responsibility. In Catholicism, the act of sex is inextricably linked to the act of procreation and as the

seventies melt away into the eighties, the ramifications of sexual wantonness come full circle.

In reaction to a perceived morality crisis in America, Christian groups started to saturate society in the seventies. In 1976, George Gallup, of the Gallup Survey Company, claimed that over 50 million Americans were "born-again" Christians, and President Jimmy Carter admitted to being one of them (www.athiests.org). Gallup proclaimed 1976 to be "The Year of the Evangelical." The Moral Majority was created in 1979 and led by Baptist minister Reverend Jerry Falwell. The Moral Majority fought to have federal laws passed that would restrict abortion, pornography, and drugs as well as overturning the Supreme Court's ruling that prayer was not allowed in public schools. Along with Falwell, several ministers became highly successful television evangelists, reaching out to people through the media.

Catholics also organized the Right-to-Life Movement, which focused mainly on ending legalized abortions. During the 1980s, the Pro-Choice Movement was also started, which focused on a woman's right to choose when and whether they wanted to bear a child. This topic is still heatedly debated today, but in 1983, director Norman Jewison felt it was time to embroil the nun in this hot topic and take her to the platform of political commentary.

Agnes of God presents a muted image of the deranged, sexual captive seen in *The Devils*. She has a bit *too* much faith and is also alienated from the world. Originally a stage play written by John Pielmeier and first performed in Waterford, Connecticut in 1979, *Agnes of God* tells the story of a young nun who murders her newborn baby and follows the investigation into why a God-fearing and oathbound woman would partake in

sexual exploits, to say nothing of murder. Sister Agnes (Meg Tilly) is a petite beauty with a heavenly voice. She was sent to the Little Sisters of Mary Madeleine convent when her mother passed away. Mother Miriam Ruth (Anne Bancroft) is the Mother Superior but is also Sister Agnes's aunt. She wants nothing more than to protect her simple-minded niece from the corruption of the outside world. But Sister Agnes gives birth to a baby, which is found dead in a wastepaper basket in Agnes's room. Dr. Martha Livingston (Jane Fonda) is sent to discover what secrets these nuns are keeping and how a nun could not only get pregnant but also end a baby's life.

When we first meet the nuns they are going about their normal daily activities. They pray in the chapel, pray in the courtyard, and pray with their rosaries. Their habits are loose and straight. The most feminine feature framed is the face. The women who have gone through the ceremony of becoming a nun wear the traditional black and white habit with a white scapular. The novice nuns, like Agnes, wear completely white habits, mantles and veils. During her first visit to the convent, Dr. Livingston asks Mother Miriam how no one could have noticed Agnes's pregnancy. Mother Miriam tells Dr. Livingston that "you could hide a machine gun under these robes and no one would ever know." This observation calls into question, "What are nuns really hiding under their robes?" Not only do their habits cover up their breasts and hips but also any unsightly curves caused by pregnancy. Their habits are covering up their sin of being a woman. Agnes's white robes represent her virginal status, but even after she has given birth and her innocence has been stripped away, the white also represents her mental simplicity.

By contrast, Mother Miriam represents a modern, rational nun, no longer putting faith in miracles and the effectiveness of prayer. There is a scientific explanation for

everything, but sometimes it is just not worth finding out what it is. Mother Miriam wants to hide from the world that rejected her. Her family disowned her and she entered the sisterhood. Walls and a guarded gate shield her from the outside world. But Mother Miriam has experienced life. She has been married, had sex, bore children, and lived the life of a normal woman. She only chose to sacrifice her earthly pleasures in her old age. Her experiences in the modern world have given her a rational mindset but also a jaded sense of religion. She does not believe in saints. In an attempt to grasp at something tangible to salvage her own waning faith, she invests herself in the belief that Agnes's birth is a miracle. Mother Miriam is the moderator between the world of pure religious devotion and the world that invests itself in scientific beliefs.

Dr. Livingston argues throughout the film that the nuns are naïve and that they hide themselves from the real world. Mother Miriam sets the record straight, telling Dr. Livingston that it was Agnes's mother who kept her home from school and kept her locked away in the house away from the world. Agnes never learned to read, never learned basic math, never had any kind of education. Agnes tells Dr. Livingston that while at the convent she had visions of her mother burning in hell and visions of a beautiful female entity in heaven, both of which spoke to her telling her good and bad things. Agnes professes to know nothing about how babies are made and does not want to accept that she was pregnant or had a baby. She is presented as highly spiritual, believing strongly in the invisible world of angels. Her overly zealous nature lends to her presentation as a mentally unstable person.

While she never strips in front of the camera or uses Christ on the cross as a masturbatory tool, she still does not embody the beautiful image of the nun that was so

prominent in earlier Hollywood films. Instead, she is physically impure, having fornicated while under the oath of chastity, and she has broken the First Commandment in murdering her newborn child. Her faith reflects the same steadfast faith of Mother Maria and Sister Benedict, but she falls into temptation, which causes her to sin again and again.

Like Sister Jeanne, Sister Agnes is hiding the truth, whether she means to or not, and only her truth can put an end to the circus of events surrounding her. Sister Agnes only confesses to the murder of her baby when she is hypnotized. Her confession is forced out of her, alluding to the process of abortion. Sister Agnes holds the truth deep within her mind (a fetus in the womb), which was placed there through an unwanted act (the fetus was created through an act of rape). Dr. Livingston is the court-appointed psychiatrist who must extract the truth through an operation involving Agnes's subconscious (a removal of the fetus from the womb). Once the information (fetus) has been forcibly extracted, she is mentally ruined. As Mother Miriam says on the first day of Livingston's investigation, Agnes could not emotionally handle the truth of the murder if she ever fully realized what it was that she did (the dubious morality of abortion). Her mental instability is apparent when she appears in court babbling incoherently about a supposed angel spreading its wings over her and then singing a song during their act of coitus.

The hypnotisms that are performed on Sister Agnes are excruciating to watch. Her final hypnotism where the truth is finally extracted ends in bloodshed and Sister Agnes revealing her hatred for God. In Agnes's mind, God let her kill the child. Instead of showing the abortion procedure, the film uses the hypnotisms to represent the horror of

having something torn from a woman's body. Agnes's confession of her hatred of God is accompanied by stigmata as her hands bleed profusely. The blood ends up on Agnes's white habit, as well as the walls of the empty room she is in. As she splays her arms, like Jesus on the cross, Agnes is aligned with Jesus. She is taken advantage of by God in order for others to be saved.

Agnes of God questions the church's stance on abortion and the legitimate reasons for a woman needing the procedure. What if it is God's will that the baby die? What if a woman has no control over her situation? What if she has not been given enough knowledge to make responsible decisions in regards to a life growing inside her? The Church does not want to educate women about their bodies and what can lead up to demoralizing situations, but the women are then punished for their ignorance.

Like the nuns in *The Devils*, Sister Agnes is sexualized, though perhaps not as overtly. Her beautiful innocence is alluring and almost childlike. When she is milking the cow in the barn she lovingly squeezes the teats and nuzzles her head into the warm udder. She finds happiness in the sound of her voice echoing in the chamber of a bell or the wonder of a bird taking flight. This innocence is what makes her the object of the audience's gaze. The mystery surrounding her actions and her behavior with Dr. Livingston causes the viewer to continually question her position. Is she really crazy or is she trying to pull the wool over our eyes? The larger question for Mother Miriam is, "Could Agnes be a Saint?" Her innocence and love for God is so strong that no matter what her crime is she is still a pure woman. Agnes is like the saints, because her beliefs are akin to the zealous beliefs of medieval times when most saints lived. If she is a saint,

then the death of her baby is not a sin but a sign from God. Mother Miriam is grasping for concrete evidence that God exists and she turns to Agnes for that evidence.

MIRIAM. There are no saints today. Good people, yes, but
extraordinarily good people? Those I'm afraid we are sorely lacking.

LIVINGSTON. Do you think they ever existed?

MIRIAM. Yes, I do.

LIVINGSTON. Do you want to become one?

MIRIAM. To become? One is born a saint.

LIVINGSTON. Well, you can try, can't you? To be good?

MIRIAM. Yes, but goodness has very little to do with it. Not all the saints
were good, in fact some of them were a little crazy. But, they were still
attached to God. Left in his hands at birth. No more. We're born, we
live, we die. No room for miracles. Oh, my dear, how I miss the
miracles.

LIVINGSTON. You think Agnes is still attached to God?

MIRIAM. Listen to her singing.

Time and time again Agnes refers to the ways of the Old Catholic church, when nuns slept in coffins to remind them of their temporal presence or fasted because God wants his children to be skinny and suffer. She is ashamed of her female body; her breasts, her monthly periods and her pregnancy are all repulsive to her. She rejects her body, which is created by God, and she hates him for having "raped" her. This time it is not, supposedly, a physical man who has "raped" the nun, but God himself, or His angel Michael. There is no praying to God for help (as was the case in the films of the 1940s,

1950s, and 1960s), only hating Him deeply for causing her pain. Agnes professes to love everyone, especially God and Jesus Christ, but her last outburst during her hypnosis session reveals her deeper thoughts of anger and frustration towards God for allowing her to be put through such an ordeal.

The actions of this nun have addressed the mystery of God but provide no answers. If she is truly crazy like the nuns in *The Devils*, then the safety of religious belief in God is still intact. There is no reason to question God if the mental stability of the person involved is in question. If Agnes is crazy and she thinks that God has impregnated her, then there must be a rational explanation for her pregnancy, because her concept of reality is faulty.

Agnes's dubious personality is questioned by Dr. Livingston, with whom viewers are meant to align themselves. She represents the modern mentality towards nuns: that they are outdated and that they are associated with visions of abusive teachers in private school. Dr. Livingston had a bad experience with the Catholic Church, removed herself from practicing the faith, believes in scientific explanations and leaves no room for divine interpretation. She spars with Mother Miriam on numerous occasions, but the bottom line to everything, even Agnes and the rest of the nuns, is that "there is more here than meets the eye."

Mother Miriam is the image of the modern nun in film. Though not the sacrificial pioneer of earlier films, she still respects her faith and her relationship with God, but her way of thinking is in tune with the changing times. She talks about smoking and confesses to not having given herself to God early on, thus having produced children and lacking the physical virginity commonly assigned to nuns. She also lies. Instead of being

honest with Dr. Livingston about the birth and her relationship to Agnes, she conceals the reality of the situation. Dr. Livingston discovers the truth in the records of the convent's basement after being tipped off by one of the other nuns. Mother Miriam also has to remind Agnes that they are no longer in the Middle Ages, that she needs to realize that the world is not like the old days when saints existed. She should not be ashamed of her body. Mother Miriam even reminds Dr. Livingston that the Catholic Church is no longer part of a medieval mindset when they are in the barn together.

LIVINGSTON. Then why did you call the police in the first place
mother, huh? Why didn't you just throw the baby into the incinerator and
be done with it?

MIRIAM. Because I am a moral person.

LIVINGSTON. Bullshit!

MIRIAM. Bullshit yourself!

LIVINGSTON. The Catholic Church doesn't have a corner on morality

MIRIAM. Who said anything about the Catholic Church?

LIVINGSTON. You just said. . .

MIRIAM. What does the Catholic Church have to do with anything?

LIVINGSTON. Nothing.

MIRIAM. What have we done to hurt you? And don't deny it. I can smell
an ex-Catholic a mile away. What did we do? Burn a few heretics, sell
some indulgences? That was in the days when the church was a ruling
body. We let governments do those things today. So what did we do to
you, eh? You wanted to neck in the backseat of a car when you were 15

and you couldn't because it was a sin? So instead of questioning that one rule. . .

LIVINGSTON. It wasn't sex. It was a lot of things, but it wasn't sex.

Mother Miriam uses her experience from before she became a nun to corner Dr. Livingston on the stance of the Catholic Church. She exposes her knowledge of both the religious world and the world looking in on religion. These scenes also reveal the outside perception that nuns are the Catholic Church. When Mother Miriam says that she is "a moral person" Dr. Livingston immediately translates that phrase to mean the Catholic Church is moral. Mother Miriam can distinguish between religion and people, understanding that there are two sides to both. A person is not made up of their religion but of their actions and choices in life. This shifts the previous perception of the nun as being an embodiment of her position to her actions speaking louder than words. The removal of Sister Miriam's moral beliefs from her profession reveals her as a modern nun. She is an individual and not a sum of beliefs forced onto her by the Catholic Church. She is able to make her own decisions about what is right and wrong. Mother Miriam accepts that sinful actions will occur but weighs their severity just like she weighs the severity of Agnes's actions.

The most intriguing element about the nun films of the seventies and eighties is that the nun seems to evade the law. As with *The Devils*, Agnes is not punished for her actions. She is allowed to go back to the convent and continue her happy life. The biggest scandal is always what will people think of the church, but Agnes and Sister Jeanne are viewed as crazy and thus not responsible for their reckless sexual behavior. Sister Jeanne was possessed and manipulated by Father Grandier and Agnes is spoken to by angels and

her mother from hell. These actions are not the behavior of a sane person. When society recognizes that Jeanne and Agnes are both mentally unstable, they are simply placed back in their convent, locked away from the rest of world. Just like in Chapter One, the nun is treated like a child. In *The Devils* and *Agnes of God*, the nun is not responsible for her actions and is locked away like a child on a time-out. The isolation is a way to force them to think about what they have done wrong.

Agnes of God, through the references to the Middle Ages and Mother Miriam's speech about Saints, places the convent outside of modern conceptions and beliefs. They lock themselves away from the sinful world in an attempt to live holy lives. They are alienated from society. There are no more miracles left in their beliefs. In a world of science and psychology, miracles are not possible. Even the idea of God ceases to exist depending on whom one talks to and what religion they are. The nun is a relic. The nuns need a link to the outside world and Mother Miriam bridges the gap between the cloistered nun and modern world. Mother Miriam is allowed to speak with outsiders and she visits the outside world (i.e. when she visits Dr. Livingston in her office).

Yet, as with all of our previous nuns, Agnes reflects changes in the focus of the Women's Rights Movement. Aside from the metaphorical analogy of Dr. Livingston performing an abortive procedure on Agnes's mind, Agnes's own decision to kill the baby is an extreme instance of a woman's right to choose between having children or not. Women are treated like children who need someone else to tell them what is right and what is wrong. Dr. Livingston, the Canadian courts, and even Mother Miriam all try to offer explanations to Agnes, but Agnes's decision is discounted. Agnes tells Dr. Livingston at several points throughout the film that she did not feel she would be a good

mother and that she is scared of babies, but she was not given the choice of motherhood. The problem is what rights a woman has over her own body. The Catholic Church denies the woman the right to learn about her body because they do not allow girls to be taught about it in school. Women are left to find out on their own how their body works, which sometimes end in pregnancy. Agnes is reminded time and again by Mother Miriam that her body is a natural object and her breasts and her monthly cycle are not shameful parts of her femininity. Agnes's ignorance over her own body is what leads to her misunderstanding the events that unfold surrounding her pregnancy. By not allowing for women to be educated, women are left with a moral dilemma if they do become pregnant. The Church and the state question the right for a woman to be able to have an abortion, but they give the woman only one option: to get married to a man.

The nuns of the 1970s and 1980s push sexuality into the spotlight. In the process, the nun has moved from angel to demon. Unlike Sister Benedict and Mother Maria, Sister Jeanne and Sister Agnes are sexually deprived and insane. They are locked away from society in their institutions, lacking a solid grasp of reality. Sister Jeanne attaches her desire to Father Grandier, whom she has seen in the streets and heard rumors about. Her desire takes the form of insanity as her dreams of becoming Father Grandier's lover are spoiled. Sister Agnes affixes her feelings of love onto an invisible masculine entity. Both of these women are responsible for murder. Sister Jeanne's lies lead to Father Grandier's death, and Sister Agnes murders her newborn baby. Their misguided emotions and mortal sins degrade the previous image of the nun and reflect a modern disdain for women and religion.

Women who choose to explore their sexuality are no longer allowed to also be the angel in the house. She is viewed as the demon, corrupting morality instead of correcting it, infecting the chaste and virtuous with sinful thoughts of sexual impurity. Through the use of the nun in film, audiences are able to discern for themselves the society's fear of women and the power they attain. The nun has thus far proven to be the political and social platform of the rising social awareness of the impact of the Women's Rights Movement. As the next two decades allow a woman greater freedom in the workplace, the nun continues her position as an outlet for political debate as well as a reflection on the social acceptance of, or lack thereof, a strong, independent woman.

Chapter Three
"It's Not Faith, It's Work."
1990-2005

1990 - East and West Germany are reunited. The World Wide Web debuts. The X rating is replaced by NC-17 (no children under 17).

1991 - US and Allies invade Iraq, four months later a Cease-fire ends Persian Gulf War. The Supreme Court limits death row appeals.

1992 - Four police officers acquitted in LA for the beating of Rodney King. *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey* reaffirmed the validity of *Roe vs. Wade*. Bill Clinton (D) elected president of the United States.

1993 - Clinton agrees to compromise on military's ban on homosexuals. Federal agents besiege Texas Branch Davidian religious cult after six are killed in a raid.

1994 - O.J. Simpson arrested in killings. Two separate killings occur at women's health clinics known to perform abortions.

1995 - Nerve gas attack in Tokyo subway. Oklahoma City Bombing by Timothy McVeigh & Terry Nichols. O.J. Simpson is found not guilty. Pope John Paul II visits the United States. *Dead Man Walking* released.

1996 - Clinton blocks ban on late-term abortions. Prince Charles and Princess Diana agree to a divorce. Clinton (D) re-elected president of the United States. The last Magdalene Laundry in Ireland closed.

1997 - Heaven's Gate cult members commit mass suicide as the Hale-Bopp comet flies past Earth. Marijuana becomes medically legal in California. **August 31**, Princess Diana killed in Paris car crash. **September 5**, Mother Teresa dies at age 87.

1998 - Pope John Paul II visits Cuba. Clinton accused of having an affair with Monica Lewinsky, later admitting it on national television. Starr Report outlines impeachment proceedings against Clinton. FDA approves Viagra.

1999 - Clinton acquitted of charges. Dr. Jack Kevorkian found guilty in assisted-suicide case. Columbine High School massacre. John F. Kennedy, Jr., Carolyn Bessette Kennedy and Lauren Bessette killed in plane crash off coast of Martha's Vineyard. Tobacco companies admit that cigarette smoking is bad. Y2K scare.

2000 - George W. Bush (R) is elected president of the United States. Vermont approves same-sex unions and the abortion pill RU-486 is finally approved in US.

2001 - Timothy McVeigh executed by lethal injection, which is televised. September 11 Terrorist Attacks. Anthrax scare rivets nation.

2002 - Conviction of defrocked priest John Geoghan for child molestation and the potential cover-up by the church. US Bishops demand a zero tolerance policy for abuse of children, but the Vatican feels it should be softened. *The Magdalene Sisters* debuts at the Venice Film Festival.

2003 - US and Great Britain invade Iraq without UN mandate. **December 13**, Saddam Hussein is captured and held for trial. Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore is forced from office after refusing to remove a monument of the Ten Commandments from government property. Bush signs a bill banning so-called partial birth abortion procedures.

2004 - Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal revealed. George W. Bush (R) is re-elected as president. Massachusetts becomes the first state to legalize gay marriage. **December 26**, a tsunami kills 200,000 people and devastates southern Asia.

The 1990s ushered in another period of great political volatility. In the United States, the national deficit was growing because of Ronald Reagan's debt carrying over from his term and George Bush's numerous expenses, including the Persian Gulf War. Numerous court cases about the right to life became a focal point in the media. *Roe vs. Wade* was challenged and the death penalty became a hot topic of discussion between political candidates. Bill Clinton's election to office in 1992 was groundbreaking for women in political positions. President Clinton appointed the first woman Attorney General, Janet Reno, the first woman Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, and he brought in Donna Shalala for a second term as the U.S. Ambassador for the United Nations. He also appointed Ruth Bader Ginsberg, a pro-choice supporter, to the Supreme Court in 1993. President Clinton also sought to allow for a larger range of options for women who needed help with an unplanned pregnancy.

During this time of progressive change for women, the nun finds herself as independent as ever. In the 1990s, nun films are a melting pot reflecting a diversity of perceptions. They span from comedic to deeply disturbing, yet they also resurrect the angelic nun with films like *Dead Man Walking* (1995) and the mini-series "The Brides of Christ" (1991). Yet, as the 2000s approached, a much more jaded and cynical view began to erupt again. Films like *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) and *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys* (2002) portrayed the nun as corrupt and villainous. But what brings these two periods together is not the depiction of the nun as good or bad, but the depiction of her as a social worker. The nun returns to the community from her hiatus as a selfish, sexualized, mentally unstable, and alienated religious being (*The Devils, Agnes of God*).

It may not be on the level of Sister Benedict (*The Bells of St. Mary's*) or Mother Maria (*Lilies of the Field*), but the nuns turn to helping others whether through institutions setup to help wayward girls or a hub in the ghetto of New Orleans. In two critical films, *Dead Man Walking* and *The Magdalene Sisters*, the nun pivots between beloved and despised, angel and demon, friend and foe.

In 1995, Tim Robbins decided to use the nun in order to speak his mind about the death penalty in America. In an interview in *Cineaste* in June of 1996, Robbins refers to his adaptation of Sister Helen Prejean's autobiographical novel *Dead Man Walking* as a film "about a nun and her relationship with these parents and with the convicted killer" (4). He wanted to bring people closer to what it was like to execute someone, exposing the two sides of what it entails as well as the hypocrisy of the court system. In order for Robbins to lead the audience through an extremely emotionally taxing ordeal, he needed Sister Helen Prejean as his morally sound guide.

In *Dead Man Walking*, Sister Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon) is contacted by Louisiana death row inmate, Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn), to assist him as his spiritual advisor. After accepting his request, she helps him find an attorney for filing his appeals and ultimately walks with him as he faces death by lethal injection. Sister Prejean is a return to the nun of upstanding virtue and morals, unlike the nuns lost in fetishes and derangement during the 1970s and 1980s. By basing her on a real person, the nun is humanized. She is sincere, struggling with tangible concepts and emotions. She is a real person placed in an extraordinary situation, unlike the fictional nuns of the previous films (*The Bells of St. Mary's*, *Lilies of the Field*, *Agnes of God*). *The Devils* was based on true events, but the nuns were based on compilations of different stories that had been

reported and passed down. The style of Russell's film is expressionistic, instead of retelling the story based on a realist perspective. *Dead Man Walking* does not enter the world of expressionism, but instead embeds itself in realism in order to fully affect the audience with its message about the death penalty.

Sister Prejean is not a stereotype but an honest embodiment of the new nun. She is the nun of a Post-Vatican II world where the Catholic Church no longer requires specific religious attire for nuns. Sister Prejean and her order reject the habit, much like the Immaculate Heart of Mary Congregation in Pennsylvania, who said, "Rather than rely on our external appearance, we challenge ourselves to let what we say, what we do, what we stand for and what we model by our choices give witness to who we are as women religious" (Kuhns, 164).

The goal of the order is no longer about fitting in and wearing constricting clothing, but dressing in clothing that is best suited for their work (instead of long black and white robes with full headdresses). Sister Helen Prejean wears nice dress suits, which provide more comfort in the hot and humid climate of New Orleans. Not only does this modernize the audience's perception of the nun, but it also reminds viewers that she is tangible instead of ethereal. Sister Prejean is realistically part of the world and also a character the audience can relate to because she is not angelically beautiful or behaving in a way removed from the way every day people act. The first time the camera catches her in the film, she is wearing a matching rose-colored vest and dress pants with a nice blouse. There is nothing to distinguish her from the crowd of people she walks through. The audience is not even aware that she is a nun until she arrives in a classroom where she teaches literacy.

When she first goes to visit Matthew Poncelet's mother, Lucille (Roberta Maxwell), she has no distinguishing marks that represent her as anyone to be trusted, not even the tiny cross around her neck affirms her religious authenticity.

LUCILLE. Who is it?

HELEN. My name is Sister Helen Prejean. I know your son Matthew.

Happy Easter.

LUCILLE. You sure you're a Sister?

HELEN. Yes.

LUCILLE. You're not from the TV?

HELEN. No.

LUCILLE. You sure? How do you know Mattie?

HELEN. I met him on death row.

LUCILLE. Well, you never know who's at your front door.

Prejean is wearing a white dress coat and a pink dress underneath. With her attire, she looks like she could be a reporter, not even in disguise. If she had been wearing the habit, there would have been no hesitation, but her clothing leads them to suspect she could harm them. The authority once granted the nun is removed once the uniform is removed and the nun must use more than her outfit to fulfill her duty as a servant of God. Sister Prejean, despite her ability to look presentable, has stripped herself of her most powerful and distinguishing asset.

Her lack of a habit or any distinctive religious garb, other than a crucifix around her neck, causes conflict with the Chaplain at the prison. Not only does Sister Prejean have to stand up to him in defense of her own legitimacy but also to her right to not wear

the habit. First Chaplain Farlely makes polite conversation and then catches her off-guard with questions about her clothing.

FARLELY. Where's your habit?

HELEN. Our Sisters haven't worn the habit for 20 years, Father.

FARLELY. You are aware of the papal request regarding nuns' garments, aren't you?

HELEN. I believe the Pope said distinctive clothing, not habits.

FARLELY. Well, I am sure you will interpret it your own way. Whatever is convenient. . . These men don't see many females. For you to wear the habit might help instill respect. For you to flout authority will only encourage them to do the same.

In their conversation, Chaplain Farlely not only reinforces his position as the man in charge but he also degrades Prejean and her choices. He tells her that she is flouting authority, even though the Pope has decreed nuns do not need to wear the habit. Chaplain Farlely still has to wear his religious garments, for which there might be resentment on his part. Why must he be the one to stand out and be chastised for his choices while Sister Prejean can wear whatever she wants and pass as a non-religious? A priest always wears his collar, but a nun can now wear clothing that does not distinguish her from another woman. He must bear the burden of his profession but Sister Prejean does not. If Sister Prejean wanted to walk into a bar, she could without people looking at her strangely, but Chaplain Farlely, with his collar, might have people turn and look at him. Sister Prejean can shed her nun-beliefs whenever it suits her since she does not have to wear a uniform, but Chaplain Farlely is always aware of his beliefs and his profession.

In the novel *Dead Man Walking*, Sister Prejean says, "I find myself searching for an explanation for the chaplain's antagonistic behavior. Maybe they feel threatened because Pat [Poncelet] had asked me and not them to be with him at the end. The movies always show a 'man of the cloth' raising his hand in blessing to the man on the scaffold. Maybe they feel that if they allow me in, others will follow and they will be displaced" (*www.pbs.org*). Sister Prejean is a threat, not only because she is putting Father Farley in an awkward position by counseling his inmate but also because she represents the new nun. She does not have to answer to any man if she does not want to. Father Farley has no power over her, except when he asserts his knowledge of the prison.

Father Farley questions the fact that Sister Prejean is a female coming to the prison. Why is she coming? What is she doing here? What does she hope to get out of her encounter with a death row inmate?

FARLEY. So what is it sister? Morbid fascination? Bleeding heart sympathy?

HELEN. He wrote me and asked me to come.

FARLEY. There is no romance here, sister. No Jimmy Cagney "I've been wrongly accused if I only had someone who believed in me" nonsense. They are all conmen and they will take advantage of you every way they can. You must be very, very careful. Do you understand?

HELEN. Yes, Father.

Farley places Prejean in an uncomfortable position by ending his warning with, "Do you understand?" as if she were a child incapable of comprehending the seriousness of what she is about to do. He belittles her and her motives, but he is not the only one.

Even her family cannot make sense of Prejean's dedication. They feel she should not be wasting her time on a death row inmate when there are other people she should be helping to ensure they stay off of death row. Yet Prejean is persistent in fulfilling her spiritual, rather than earthly, duty as a nun and doing what is requested of her. Poncelet needs her counsel and she feels that she can make a difference, even if it is just showing him that he has a friend.

Father Farley's reproach of Sister Prejean resembles the way men treat Sister Benedict (*The Bells of St. Mary's*) and Mother Maria (*Lilies of the Field*). Father Farley feels he is knowledgeable about the prison, a veteran of spiritual counseling among prisoners, and he is asserting his authority through his knowledge. He rebukes her for her pure intentions to come and spiritually mentor an inmate, assuming she is there to find romance, because what else do women come to prisons for but to find a man they can invest themselves in? Especially when her clothing is not distinctive and does not hide her body the way a habit would. Father Farley thinks that women do not come to prisons just to be friends, especially a nun, who must be sexually frustrated, repressing her sexual urges and wanting to fulfill her desires with an eager, repressed death row inmate. But Sister Prejean does not need to express her sexual desires, because like Sister Agnes, she believes in love. Not romantic love but love for God and His creation.

Sister Prejean becomes Poncelet's friend and an image of love, hope, kindness, mercy, and strength. As she counsels him during his turmoil, she comes to see him as a person. She recognizes that people function on many levels. She believes that some have anger in their hearts, some have love and as long as you embrace God, the truth will set you free. Poncelet sees something in Sister Prejean that no one has ever shared with him

before. She has taken the time to make him a priority in her life and he clings to her like a life preserver. She is Poncelet's heavenly angel and in the end, her face is the image of love that Poncelet needed in order to find God and happiness. Her face sheds a single tear, reminiscent of Sister Benedict when she prays for the last time in her chapel before leaving St. Mary's. People need a pretty face to remind them of the beauty and goodness in the world, but Sister Prejean is not the beautiful Ingrid Bergman. Sister Prejean's beauty comes from inside. It comes from her love and sympathy for a man who needs her.

Sister Prejean overcomes the obstacles of male domination and finds her equal in a man who has been stripped of his rights. Like Sister Prejean, Poncelet is a prisoner of society, ostracized for leading a life different from the average person and breaking prescribed norms of how men and women should behave. As their relationship blooms and Poncelet finds an increasing amount of comfort in Sister Prejean, the camera starts to reflect each of them in the other's reverse shot. When Prejean is speaking with him through the door on death row, in the reflection we see Poncelet. When Poncelet is speaking to Prejean, there is a reflection of her in the door. They see something in each other that will help them along their way. Sister Prejean has opened her heart and given her gifts to the community, helping those who are in need and in the end, Poncelet professes to have found peace with God.

Sister Helen Prejean suggests a return to the angelic image presented in 1940s through 1960s nun films. Prejean not only works on a moral level but also on a spiritual level. She cares about the ways in which she can help her community. She relies not on miracles happening but on God's Word to get her through. She is a woman of the New

Testament; instead of subscribing to the thoughts of punishment, she thinks only of redemption through Christ. She tells Poncelet "the truth will set you free," because when he is finally honest with himself then will he be honest with God. "Just because Jesus died doesn't give you a free ticket. That's what makes [Sister Prejean] different from some of the religious women and men I was taught by," Robbins reflects (*Cineaste*, 6). But Sister Prejean is a working woman and her responsibility is to the community she helps and those who are in need of her services. It is not faith alone that makes her do the good deeds that she does, it is her job. She took the job because of her faith, but her job requires her to go where she is needed, just as Sister Benedict had to leave St. Mary's School because she was needed elsewhere. Their faith is what gets them there, but it is the work, the job, that makes them important.

Even with this amazing portrayal of a real-life nun who has done good deeds and helped people in need, there is a downside to the trend of the real-life portrayal. In 2002, the Catholic Church was beginning to experience a backlash. The conviction of defrocked priest John Geoghan for child molestation and the potential cover-up by the Church did not bode well for most Catholics. US Bishops met to discuss the problems facing the priesthood and what they could do in order to reestablish their credibility. They demanded a zero tolerance policy for abuse of children, but the Vatican felt it should be softened; as God forgives, so we should forgive (www-tech.mit.edu/V122/N6). It is during this time that an explosive film blasted onto the radar of millions of Catholics and moviegoers alike. Peter Mullan's *The Magdalene Sisters* caused controversy at the Cannes Film Festival and even riled up the Vatican. It was condemned by some and hailed by others for its unflattering portrayal of hypocritical nuns. Instead of reasserting

the image of a kind-hearted Sister Helen Prejean, Sister Bridget, an impious, selfish, greedy, hypocritical nun with no love for the community, comes to the forefront, complete with historical accuracy provided by women who had experienced the abuse of the Magdalene laundries first hand.

The Magdalene Sisters was inspired by Steven Humphries's controversial BBC documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998), which interviews survivors of the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland and reveals the horrendous atrocities of the Catholic Church. The Magdalene Asylums, or laundries, were where families sent women who put the morality of society at risk. They were young women who had either had sex out of wedlock, become pregnant out of wedlock, tempted men with their beauty, or were too simple to understand the tempestuous affect they had on the men around them. Many of these women were held prisoner in these laundries and only a man of the family or their priest could come to set them free. According to Andrew Sarris in "Magdalene Survivors Speak - British Doc Inspired Mullan's Film," "an estimated three million people watched the documentary, one of the highest figures ever recorded for the series. A help line was set up, which received calls from almost 450 women who had experienced abuse and trauma through the Magdalene Asylums and the Catholic Church. The documentary was blacklisted by the Irish network RTE and to this date has never been officially aired in Ireland."

In Mullan's interview with *Cineaste*, he explains how when he saw the documentary just before going to Cannes, he became determined to learn more about the institution that put girls away for being a sexual threat to society. *Sex in a Cold Climate* is a talking-heads documentary, with a few historical pictures thrown in for good measure.

Four women discuss their tortured existence in a Magdalene laundry. Martha Coomy, Christinay Mulcahy, Phyllis Valentine and Brigid Young braved the exposure and brought truth to the surface. Shortly after the release of the film, however, the Catholic Church denounced the factual nature of their stories and the stories of the 450 women who called in after the documentary was aired.

The Catholic Church even went so far as to make charges against Mullan and his film, labeling it "anti-Catholic" and trying to stir up as much controversy so that the film would be ignored. Mullan, though, feels that the claims and charges the Vatican raised against his film are absurd. "What the film is highly critical of is the Catholic Church's involvement in the abuse of its own kind. It is critical of theocracy in general, so they're quite right to say that there were Protestant Magdalenes" (*Cineaste*, 33). He draws out the point even farther, saying that there must even be Muslim Magdalenes "--they called themselves the Taliban." All Mullan wanted to accomplish with this film was "getting an apology, the individual apology, to these women, and the genuine confession that needs to come from the Church, then I'll die a happy man. That's principally what I'm looking for" (*Cineaste*, 33).

In May of 2004, the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland, the order that was responsible for the laundries, issued an apology for the "physical and emotional trauma suffered by many people who as children lived in our orphanages and industrial schools" (www.sistersofmercy.ie). While a step in the right direction, the Magdalene Memorial Committee is outraged that they were not recognized for their suffering. Since Mullan's film, a surge in interest about the Magdalene laundries has occurred. Numerous books

relating to the industrial schools and laundries have surfaced, as well as a fictionalized story of a woman placed in a Magdalene institute.

Peter Mullan fashioned a film that could reach the masses and make people around the world aware of what was going on and had been going on until 1997, the most recent known date that a laundry was still operating. Suddenly stories about the laundries popped up all over the world, from Ireland to North and South America, and even Australia, and the Vatican's charges of absurdity slowly dissolved into nothing more than vapors. During my conversation with Mullan in May 2005, he revealed that the church has since retracted their statements and the film is now used in nun training courses as an example of how not to act.

Unlike the highly sexualized nuns of the 1970s and 1980s, Peter Mullan's nun is a desexualized woman. Her habit is restrictive, with a black scapular hiding the curves of the chest, waist, and thighs. Unlike Sister Benedict, Mullan's Sister Bridget (Geraldine McEwan) is older and world weary, lacking the vivacious hunger for life that Sister Benedict was praised for. Sister Bridget is the Mother Superior of a Magdalene laundry in Dublin, Ireland in the 1960s. She is the main antagonist in the film and, from her first appearance through her last encounters with the three main characters; she is as corrupt as the nuns from *The Devils*. In an interview with Tom Dawson of the BBC Online, McEwan says that Sister Bridget is "constrained, and frustrated and unfulfilled intellectually and sexually." This leads to her harsh behavior towards the Magdalenes.

When she is introduced for the first time, the shot is from behind as she sits at her large desk, a picture of President John F. Kennedy on the right hand corner of her desk, dividend books on the left side of her desk and no visible indication of God. A jump cut

reveals a crucifix hanging from her neck and the camera pans down to Sister Bridget's wrinkled, old hands counting money as she drones on about the purpose of the Magdalene Laundry. After a brief montage of the demanding physical labor the girls will have to endure at the laundry, the camera cuts back to Sister Bridget still counting her money. The camera pans left exposing a large biscuit tin full of rolls of money, then focuses on a cross that sits on the very edge of her desk. Another cut returns to the establishing shot at the beginning of the scene, this time without Sister Bridget, but offering a better view of the money, President Kennedy, her dividend books and the tiny, almost invisible cross.

The amount of space taken up by each item on the desk reveals Sister Bridget's priorities. First are her funds (money, dividend books), then power (respected Catholic and president of the United States, President Kennedy), and lastly, God. In an interview by *Cineaste*, Mullan explains Bridget's obsession with money as being "the means to measure whether she's doing a good job or not. The fact that she judges what she does according to financial gain, which secures for her the approval of the Church, is another example of how warped it's all become" (29). It is the numbers, not the deeds, which reflect her performance as the head of the laundry.

Immediately Sister Bridget is portrayed as a hypocrite who loves money, not God. As the scene continues, her thoroughly corrupt morality is exposed. As Sister Bridget continues to address the girls, she stands up and crosses over to them in front of her desk. We see her full body, but it is not until she addresses Margaret (Anne-Marie Duff) that we see her face. An extreme close-up brings the viewer face to face with Sister Bridget, awkwardly assaulting the viewer with the intensity of her intimate proximity. With a

cruel smile, Sister Bridget sternly warns Margaret, “Don’t ever interrupt me, girl. Did no one ever tell you it's bad manners to interrupt? Or were you too busy whoring with the boys to listen? Is that what it was?” There is no compassion from Sister Bridget. Her desire to assert her authority over the girls is so great that she immediately attacks their self-confidence. As she addresses each of the three girls, Margaret, Bernadette (Nora-Jane Noone), and Rose (Dorothy Duffy), who is renamed Patricia, Sister Bridget refers to each of them as “simpletons” or “simple-minded,” again demeaning their sense of self-worth.

The laundry is a prison and the nuns are the prison guards, but you will not find any Sister Helen Prejeans in this prison. The nuns in this laundry are full of the conviction that the cruel and inhumane actions they subject the girls to will help to save the girls' souls. Mullan compares the nuns in the laundries to Nazis, while observing that rarely, if ever, are Nazis given the opportunity to have their softer, more humane side shown (*Cineaste*, 31). This is a horrific comparison but one that is efficacious in view of the situation.

Sister Bridget’s position of authority is so powerful, she abuses the hold she has over the girls’ futures and their immortal souls, telling them their lives will be spent in the laundry and that the sanctity of their souls is at stake. This unforgiving attitude is directly linked to the nuns in *The Devils* (1971). Instead of recognizing their faults and proclaiming the innocence of Father Grandier, Sister Jeanne permits him to die. Sister Bridget, instead of recognizing that not all of these girls are guilty of sexual sins, exploits their position as slaves in order to continue with her comfortable, powerful life.

Yet, Sister Bridget manages to still exhibit the qualities of a genuine and strong independent woman aside from her frequent bullying. Like the nuns before her, she is the head of her institution, running it and managing its stability. When the technology of the day changes, she invests in new dryers and she has connections, such as the wealthy businessmen in town who own film projectors. Unlike the earlier films of the 1940s and 1950s, where men controlled the nuns, the men of the community respect Sister Bridget and she even commands the Father of the laundry. During a spring celebration in the courtyard of the laundry, Father Fitzroy (Daniel Costello) is busy filming the girls with his brand new camera, but Sister Bridget is in control of the celebration. She stands on the sidelines, still exercising a reserved control that allows Father Fitzroy to appear in charge because he is the only man. Sister Bridget keeps an eye out for any suspicious activities, ready to pounce on anyone who steps out of line.

A similar scene occurs later in the film when the wealthy businessman, Mr. Lanigan, brings his film projector to the laundry on Christmas Day. The Archbishop (Allan Sharpe) is in attendance and even with two prominent men present, Sister Bridget is running the show. She addresses everyone in attendance, telling a short story about her childhood love affair with films and explaining how she told her mother if she could not be a nun, then she wanted to become a cowboy. Her command of the audience is important, because following the screening of the iconic film *The Bells of St. Mary's*, Sister Bridget will slowly start to lose control of the girls (Margaret, Bernadette, Rose).

The screening of *The Bells of St. Mary's* is not a coincidence. Peter Mullan chose the film because when he was a child he "thought that every priest was like Pat O'Brien or Spencer Tracy and that every young nun was Ingrid Bergman" (*Cineaste*, 30). Sister

Bridget is first aligned with Sister Benedict during a brief clip where Sister Benedict is explaining to Patsy that "you don't become a nun to run away from life." Sister Bridget sees herself as the young Patsy being told that you must first experience life before devoting it to God. Just as Patsy sees herself in Sister Benedict, Sister Bridget sees her past in Patsy and her present in Sister Benedict. Sister Bridget's intentions as a nun come full circle during another powerful moment in *The Bells of St. Mary's*, when she sheds a tear during Sister Benedict's prayer at the end of the film. Sister Benedict is asking for bitterness to be removed from her heart so that she can carry on with God's work unburdened by anger. An extreme close-up shows the tear running down the right side of Sister Bridget's cheek and a reverse shot shows a close-up of Sister Benedict looking as beautiful as an angel, and a tear runs down her right cheek in the same manner.

There are many connections between the two women but compassion is not one of them. The actress Geraldine McEwan believes that Sister Bridget wants to see "herself as beautiful and pure and doing good works," but "she behaves in an excessive manner when handing out punishments." There is no self-control, only her frustrations being expressed through the physical abuse of the girls. Through the use of *The Bells of St. Mary's*, Sister Bridget is positioned in stark contrast to the angelic form of the nun in early post-war films. Both characters reside in that same twenty-year span of history, but only one reflects the angelic embodiment of the nun while the other is depicted with the caustic edge of a modern viewpoint. Sister Bridget thinks that her actions are right because she has experience that the girls of the laundry lack, but unlike Sister Benedict, Sister Bridget despises the girls in her care. Sister Bridget is not teaching a classroom full

of eager young children. She is punishing women who broke God's commandments. She has to exert force over the unruly, instead of reveling in the exuberance of education.

The angelic nature of Sister Benedict is contrasted with the demonic Sister Bridget even more when Margaret confronts Sister Bridget after the screening of *The Bells of St. Mary's*. Margaret has been rescued from the laundry by her brother and decides to take one last stand against Sister Bridget before she leaves. While walking down the hallway, Margaret sees Sister Bridget with Mr. Lanigan and the Archbishop. She steps aside, but as they approach, she steps out in front of her.

MARGARET. May I get past, please, Sister?

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

MARGARET. I'm not moving, Sister.

BRIDGET. Fine. Then you'll be staying with us, then.

MARGARET. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.

ARCHBISHOP. I think we should be moving on.

Sister Bridget does not stand for such insolence, so while she attempts to battle this girl by standing firm, the men move on to leave her to handle the problem. Attempting to assert her power over the ex-penitent one last time, Sister Bridget threatens to keep her at the laundry, no matter what her male family members say. This fails, as the men of the group feel this little squabble should be ignored, because it is accomplishing nothing and

does not concern them. The Archbishop takes control of the situation because Sister Bridget seems unable to control this one girl without threats and anger. The men view the situation as childish, but the viewer knows the critical importance of what Margaret is doing. A girl simply wants to get by, but the nun wants to make a scene. Margaret undermines Sister Bridget, knowing that male power will reassert itself once Margaret is able to prove how petty Sister Bridget behaves.

Sister Bridget has to be tough in a man's world, which means being merciless to other women because she cannot dominate men. She exerts her limited power at every opportunity. The only scene in the film where Sister Bridget even expresses the slightest bit of remorse for her actions is after Crispina (Eileen Walsh), a feeble-minded girl who is taken advantage of sexually by the laundry's priest, is taken away to Mount Vernon Hospital, a mental institution. After discovering Father Fitzroy's abuse, Sister Bridget decides that Crispina should be removed from the laundry, and as Crispina is dragged out of the building, Sister Bridget follows. She closes the front door and, with her hands clasped behind her back, slowly walks down the hall. She stops as she comes closer to the bench in the corridor and she sits down. A cut to a close up of the left side of her face as she sits with her mouth slightly agape, her head slightly turned down, reveals a sympathetic side previously unseen. She slowly looks up, her eyes fluttering, composing herself. Her look, so genuine and troubled, is the only time remorse is reflected in her face. Sister Bridget knows that sending Crispina away to Mount Vernon Hospital was the wrong thing to do because Crispina was the victim, not Father Fitzroy.

Sister Bridget is helpless the last time she is seen in the film. Patricia and Bernadette search for the front gate key, paralleling a scene when Sister Bridget was

looking for the key to the new safe, tearing through drawers all over the office. Just when Bernadette grabs the key out of the drawer, Sister Bridget emerges in her nightcap and gown and starts hitting her. Desperate, Bernadette grabs a pair of scissors off of the desk and holds them to Sister Bridget's throat. As Bernadette threatens Sister Bridget, demanding that she let go of the front gate key, Patricia places the previously lost key to the safe on the desk, silently bargaining with Sister Bridget for their freedom. Sister Bridget, after a brief moment, lets go of the front gate key and the girls quickly escape from the room. Sister Bridget sits slumped in a chair, staring at the key on the desk. She might have fought to keep the girls in the laundry because they represent free labor, but, once she is offered the key to her safe which has all of the money for the laundry locked inside, the choice for her is easy. Harkening back to the early scene of her at her desk, money is always first and her religious convictions come last. For Sister Bridget, it is about her job and the money, not her faith, unlike Sister Prejean for whom job and faith go hand in hand.

As with Sister Agnes and Sister Prejean, Sister Bridget is a tool that fuels a political debate. In my phone conversation with director Peter Mullan, we discussed the horrible revelation of the imprisonment of these women in Ireland by the Catholic Church and how important it was for the story to be told. These women have not received an apology from the Church; many of them have lost their children, and the government is now attempting to make it illegal for mothers from laundries and their children to contact each other, imposing a fine and possibly imprisonment. It is not just Ireland that has done this. Laundries can be found all over the world. Through the release of this film,

many women have had the opportunity to tell their story and find some peace in their lives.

Sister Bridget and Sister Helen Prejean are polar opposites. One puts her faith in money and power, the other in love and charity. The two extremes are melded from the long history of the nun on the screen and have affected not only the social perception of women at the time, but also of the Catholic Church. Both are tools for the filmmakers making a statement about political corruption in their countries, but they also represent the side of the nun that focuses on the community. They are teachers, nurses, and mentors, not just women who pray all day and live a chaste life. They are both evil and good, friend and foe. Both are from different periods in history, but they share similar outlooks on their positions. They are passionate about what they do, even though they express it in different ways.

The nun of the 1990s and 2000s is portrayed in many different ways. Some filmmakers use her as a political spokeswoman and others use her for social commentary. She ranges from a serial killer to a guardian angel and no one seems to be able to agree on a set depiction of her. More often than not, you will find the nun used for comic relief, but when she is used in a drama, she is always there presenting the past, present, and future of Women's Rights and social standards.

Conclusion Spectacles, Testicles, Wallet and Watch?

The nun has come a long way since the post-war angel, Sister Benedict. She has traveled to Hell and back, withstanding the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as standing up for the rights of women. During the early years of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the nun was a pioneer, rising above adversity and helping to build a stronger community. Sister Benedict and Mother Maria led the way for a better life, Sister Benedict striving to imbue morality in her students while also giving them a better place to grow, and Mother Maria facing the desolate land of Arizona, determined to build a chapel for the community. They do not think about the pleasures of the flesh but about what needs to be done to make the community stronger. They represent the rise of the workingwoman and her new independence and self-reliance.

Yet this new independence was frightening to a society previously dominated solely by men. As women started to explore their sexuality and their social freedom, the nun was used to reflect the fears society had about a women's repressed sexual urges. *The Devils* uses the nun to explore the dangers of women being free to unlock their sexuality. Through their loss of control over their sexual urges, the nuns personify a grave warning against the sexual revolution. Once a woman's desire is released, it can never be controlled and she will stop at nothing in order to have her desires fulfilled. If her efforts to fulfill her desires continue to be thwarted, terrible events will befall those who embody her lustful desires, such as Father Grandier burning alive at the stake. The nun, possessing a great amount of sexual frustration, emblemizes the new woman of the

1970s as the sexual revolution hits its peak and, at the same time, representing Ken Russell's grim vision of a society ruined by sexuality.

During the 1980s, Women's Rights became more politically inclined, becoming the focus of presidential debates as well as Supreme Court rulings. During this time the nun became a platform for political debate. In *Agnes of God*, the nun exemplifies the increasing number of young women struggling to find answers about unwanted pregnancy. The issues raging over abortion, birth control, and sex education were at the forefront of the political agenda and by using Sister Agnes as an extreme case (a woman completely removed from any knowledge of sex), the issue is made more than apparent. The right a woman has to manipulate her body and mind as she sees fit are challenged, and the nun, as an innocent, reveals the extreme outcome of sex without knowledge.

When the 1990s approached, the hot topic was capital punishment and in 1995, director/actor Tim Robbins turned Sister Helen Prejean's novel *Dead Man Walking* into a heart-wrenching political commentary on the events surrounding killers on death row and the families they have hurt. Sister Prejean is a return to the nun of the early post-war film. She is independent, spiritual, and caring, but she acquires the saintly traits of selflessness and practicality. Her goal is to serve her community to the best of her abilities and while doing so, explore the world of death row. Her ethereal presence is morally beautiful and she also reveals the new side of the independent, established working woman of the 1990s.

In 2002, Peter Mullan's *The Magdalene Sisters* depicts the nun as an oppressor of women but also as an independent woman, especially for the era she was placed in (1964). Sister Bridget is a return to the demonic nun of the 1970s, with her sexual

frustration, as well as abuse of power, leading to the defilement of the community. But she is the head of an institution and strong, harkening back to the liberated lifestyle of Mother Maria and Sister Benedict.

Images of the nun are diverse. She shifts from angel to demon and back again. Much of the shifting between angel and demon is influenced by the outlook on women during that period in time and other times it is the positive or negative influence of the Catholic Church. Yet the nun stands as an example of the diversity found in an independent woman and she has become a symbol for the continuing conversation on Women's Rights around the world. Whether it is political or purely social, the nun is a well-known figure throughout the world and is an effective character choice when attempting to address independence, sexual repression, and the right to power for women.

The nun, I fear, will never fully recapture the adventuresome pious spirit she once had in the early Hollywood films, but now and again she reemerges in a new form, like a phoenix from its ashes (*Dead Man Walking*). As expressed in *Agnes of God*, the nun is like an ancient relic, unfit for the world of today. Therefore, in many modern films she is recast in an era more fitting for her appearance, when nuns were as plentiful in our society as their avian cousins, the penguins, are on northern icy coasts. Now it is even hard to pick them out of the crowd, since many have shed their visual staples and they are only recognized by their name and sometimes their position at their place of work (hospital, school, etc).

And yet despite her strong will and independence, the nun will never be free of the patriarchal society that dominates most of the world. She is part of the Catholic Church, which is run by men, and women are still part of the minority in positions of

power. Because of this, she will always be the subject of the gaze, grotesque or not. The focus of the audience will always be on her, wondering what the nun will do in these situations that are presented, looking to her as a sign of moral rectitude. Sometimes as with *The Magdalene Sisters*, it is cathartic to hate Sister Bridget, but with *The Devils* our interest is purely sexual, forcing the viewer to come to terms with their own sexuality through the cumbersome depiction of a non-sexual stereotype exhibiting overt desires of a sexual nature. Men are the cause of their pain, either through rape, possible insemination, or seduction. On a non-sexual level, they demean her intentions, assuming her actions are somehow selfish, impractical, or childish. In a world where even the explanation of the sacred sign of the cross is oriented towards the male body, someone must forge ahead and help mold a world of equality for people of all genders, races, and religions.

If the nun is such a strong and powerful woman, why would Mecklen choose to describe her as “half a woman?” As can be seen in all six films that have been discussed, these women are independent, rejecting the typical roles of women in society. But not only do they reject the preconceived role of the woman in society but also in the church.

According to Genesis, God made woman as a companion for Adam, who was lonely in the Garden of Eden. Then, after Eve ate the forbidden fruit, plunging the world into irredeemable sin, she was told that as a punishment she would experience great pains during childbirth. A nun does not fulfill her role as a woman, defined by the book of Genesis.

She does not take a physical man as her husband, but an ethereal being (Jesus Christ). Then, because she did not take a man as her husband, she has skirted part of her punishment as a woman for committing the first sin by not giving birth to children and experiencing the excruciating pain of childbirth. I would hate for these things to sound all negative, but on the flip side, the nun sacrifices the opportunity to build a loving home with a man she loves and share all the pleasures of motherhood and wifedom. By society's and the Church's standards, she is not fulfilling her role of a woman.

At the same time, the nun also rejects her status as a woman taking on attributes typically contributed to a man. She is powerful, desensitized, and desexualized. Her independence sets her apart from the typical woman, heading institutions and being the dominate persona in positions where men are involved (think Mother Maria and Homer or Sister Prejean and Matthew Poncelet).

This "half a woman" is still an amazing role model, capable of inspiring great change in society. The nun permeates our visual culture through art, television, and film, but to think of the intent of her presence in these mediums is the key to understanding her role in the world and why she has survived so long as a prominent figure in the history of dozens of countries.

The nun is a sacred image, filled with meaning on multiple levels. She represents the good and the bad of a world that has moved past the cloisters and habits of early Catholicism. She has rebelled from within and from without the Catholic Church, instituting a powerful persona to be reckoned with not only in a socially conscious way, but also within the realm of religious debate. What is the nun's role in the church? As women step up to take positions of power over men, what does that mean for the nun?

Even through the bad representations, the nun holds the power to influence men and forge a community built on the ideals of women.

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