Sacrifice was “a valued quality in a woman,” observes Yvonne McKenna in her discussion of Irish women’s vocations from the 1930s–1960s (“Entering” 199). Edna O’Brien’s short story, “A Scandalous Woman” (1972), ends with the observation that Ireland is “a land of strange, sacrificial women” (33). O’Brien’s statement applies to nuns in short stories like Mary Lavin’s “Chamois Gloves” (1956) and “Eterna” (1976), Michael MacLaverty’s “The Road to the Shore” (1976), Una Walsh Troy’s “The Apple” (1984), Rita Kelly’s “Trousseau” (1986) and Mary O’Donnell’s “Minerva’s Apprentice” (1991), as well as to nuns in novels like Mary Rose Callaghan’s The Awkward Girl (1990) and Deirdre Madden’s One by One in the Darkness (1996). J.J. Lee observes that, “Priests feature fairly prominently in modern Irish writing, nuns hardly at all” (136). Likewise, Mary P. Magray argues that nuns are largely absent from Irish literature “with the exception of a few books written by women who retell the experiences of their convent schooldays” (13). The short stories and novels discussed in this essay show that, despite their limited appearances, nuns play important roles in Irish fiction of the 1950s to 1990 due to the sacrificial nature of their vocation and the resulting feminine spaces that are created when this sacrifice is made without the pure intention of giving themselves up to Christ.

The sacrifices of the nuns depicted by these writers relate to Catholic notions of the Madonna. Gerardine Meaney discusses the promotion of the Virgin Mary as Ireland’s figurative queen in the early decades of the Irish state, from the 1920s-1950s (133). She posits that the Irish male “policing of the internal border constituted by women’s bodies” through the deployment of an asexual, disembodied Madonna ideal during the 1920s-1950s and again in the 1980s (127) helped “assert a rigid and confined masculine identity, against the [British] colonizers’ stereotype of their subjects as feminine, wild, un governable” (128).

Mary P. Magray posits that nuns were largely responsible for the transformation of the Irish from the “traditional Gaelic Catholic culture” of the era of the penal laws of the 1600s and the first half of the 1700s, when the power of the Church eroded (3), to the “devout, bourgeois Catholic culture” of the late 1800s that was still dominant when her book was published in 1998 (vii, 4). Magray says that a primary motive for women to become nuns in the 1800s was “to be able to do what they called meaningful labor” (viii). Still, Magray points out that the “irony is that as the creators and enforcers of a new model, Irish Catholic ideology that idealizes meek and docile women, Irish nuns themselves helped create the very conditions that ultimately robbed them of their autonomy” by 1870 (130).

In the early twentieth century, there were 8,000 nuns in Ireland in 35 orders and 368 convents, compared with only 1,552 nuns in 1851 (MacCurtain, “Late” 54). This increase in the number of nuns occurred while the total population of Ireland decreased by half, according to Magray (9). Nuns constituted 70% of the Irish Catholic clergy in 1901 (Magray 9). Later, missionary work appealed to idealistic youth in the decades after the Irish civil war of 1922-23, allowing them “to turn away from the troubling dilemma of
legitimized physical force . . . [when] devotional Catholicism peaked” (MacCurtain, “Godly” 247). Gerardine Meaney observes that the missionary tradition revises Ireland’s old colonial role, making the Irish into would-be saviors of “black babies” (137). McKenna points out that other motives for becoming a nun during the first half of the century were “professional advancement and personal achievement” (“Entering” 198). Many saw a vocation as “an attractive alternative” to becoming a mother and wife (McKenna, “Entering” 206). In 1941, one of every 400 Irish women was a nun (MacCurtain, “Godly” 248). While the 1950s was the peak decade for new vocations for nuns (MacCurtain, “Godly” 248), 1967 was the peak year for the total number of Irish nuns (McKenna 45). Nuns brought income to the Catholic Church through teaching at boarding schools for young ladies and nursing in hospitals (MacCurtain, “Godly” 248). The decrease in the number of female vocations for nuns began in the 1960s, as other work opportunities appeared (McKenna, “Embodied” 59).

Ivana Bacik reports that in 1991, 91% of the Irish identified themselves as Catholic; in 2011, that figure had declined to 84% (18). Though part of that decline may be explained by the immigration of non-Catholics into Ireland, many would blame the abuse of women and children by the Irish Catholic Church that became a frequent news story starting in the 1990s. Frances Finnegan criticizes the nuns who worked in the Irish Magdalen laundries that remained open until late in the twentieth century: “in striving after sanctity, they lost something of humanity too” (244). Bacik writes that the state was also morally compromised, for “unique to Ireland was the extent of the state’s reliance on religious orders to provide institutional care to children” (21). In 2002, the Irish state began reimbursing the victims of abuse by clerics, which may eventually add up to “a staggering bill for the state and taxpayers,” according to Bacik (26). In 2013, the Taoiseach, or Irish Prime Minister, apologized to the victims of Irish Magdalen laundries from 1922 to 1996 (Bacik 26). Referencing the Magdalen laundries scandal in particular and Irish Catholic clerical abuse of children more generally, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford observed in 2006 that “the decline of Irish vocations has been precipitous and it has accelerated in the last decade” (10). Despite the liberalization of Irish culture due in part to the influence of the European Union and the erosion of Catholic piety in the wake of Church scandals since 1990, the Catholic Church in 2011 still ran over 90% of Ireland’s primary schools and a significant percentage of hospitals (Bacik 19).

Tom Inglis asserts that a problem with interpreting Irish works written in or set in the past is the recent, dramatic change in Irish culture: “Over the past fifty years we have moved in Ireland from a Catholic culture of self-abnegation in which sexual desire and pleasure were repressed, to a culture of consumption and self-indulgence in which the fulfillment of pleasure and desires is emphasized” (Inglis 11). This essay discusses novels and short stories written or set between the 1950s and 1990, when Irish culture was changing due to the influence of the European Union, but before the Magdalen laundry and Irish clerical abuse scandals that were revealed after 1990. In looking at this transitional period, this essay identifies the literary depictions of nuns’ sacrifices or, in many cases, attempted sacrifices, as many of the characters are unable to perform the self-abnegation that is required due to conflicts with their own modern ways and desires. These depictions reveal the myriad reasons a woman would choose to follow this vocation while, for some of the selections, conceiving alternative spaces for the development of female agency.
Northern Irish writer Deirdre Madden portrays a nun passionately devoted to missionary work in *One by One in the Darkness*. Unlike nuns she knew in Kenya who were homesick for Ireland, Sister Benedict becomes “homesick” for Kenya once she is sent to teach in Northern Ireland (156). Sister Benedict’s problem is accepting this command; she considers resigning from her order so that she might return to Kenya as a secular aid worker (157). “The people I knew in Kenya gave me more in twenty years than I could have given them in twenty lifetimes,” Sister Benedict explains to Helen Quinn, a student she tries to advise at the Northern Irish convent where she is principal (156).

Heather Ingman points out that the reason Sister Benedict is unable to convince Helen to attend university outside of Northern Ireland is because she lacks the “detachment” of the Reverend Mother in Kate O’Brien’s *Land of Spices* (1941), who succeeds at convincing her student Anna to raise her goals (182). As a member of her order, Sister Benedict should sacrifice her “self” and whatever attachments or identifications she may have made in the past in favor of what her vocation tells her to follow. However, born in Tipperary, Ireland, Sister Benedict calls Northern Ireland “this horrible place” (Madden 159). Even though Helen likes nationalistic, Northern Irish Sister Philomela less than Sister Benedict, Sister Philomela manages to persuade Helen to study law in Belfast because “We need our Catholic lawyers in this society” (158). Sister Philomela builds on Helen’s loyalty to “my home,” as Helen—not Sister Benedict—describes Northern Ireland (159). While Sister Benedict can sacrifice her time and body to missionary work, she is incapable of accepting the loss of that beloved sacrifice of herself to Kenya.

An Abbey playwright during the 1940s, and later a novelist, Una Walsh Troy (known also as Elizabeth Connor) explores another nun who questions her orders’ commands in her feminist story, “The Apple.” Mother Mary Aloysius is thrilled to be allowed to leave her convent to visit her family’s home near the sea after thirty years away from it. However, the rules of the order forbid the middle-aged nun from entering her family’s home. Mother Mary disobeys, rejoicing in the familiar sights that she will now be able to recall for the rest of her life. At the story’s end, Mother Mary decides that she did not commit a mortal sin after all.

Her “Apple” of knowledge is the realization that “the world that others had fashioned for her with loving minds” is not the true one (167). Walsh Troy says of Mother Mary’s forbidden pleasure: “she did not yet realise how precious and how terrible was the price she had paid for it” (167). Mary’s possible fall is not into sin, but into a lonely awareness that will isolate her from her fellow nuns, and perhaps cause her to desert her order. Obedience for its own sake, as a virtue, will no longer be the self-evident course for Mary. Mary’s acquaintance with freedom is “precious” yet “terrible” for any Catholic, but especially for a nun, for how can she be free? Mary sacrifices her later peace of mind for the sweet apple of an individualized memory that will set her on a path her sisters will not share. Like Madden’s Sister Benedict, Walsh Troy’s Mother Mary will now think rebellious thoughts that her peers will not accept, especially from a nun.

McKenna writes of Irish nuns in the 1930s-1960s, “As iconic figures of Irish womanhood…neither the mother nor the nun left much space for the individual within” (“Embodied” 45). She adds, “Singularity of any form was frowned upon” (“Embodied” 57). Magray contends that others often took credit for Irish nuns’ achievements in the eighteenth and nineteenth century because for “a social system that engenders female
sexual dependence women who live outside the heterosexual norm are a marginalized group...taken for granted” (13). Magray writes that the reason for the rule that women should cut their ties with family and friends when they joined Irish convents of the 1800s was to prevent distractions from their dedication to God and to help each Mother Superior gain unrivalled authority over new nuns (52, 55).

Walsh Troy's protagonist's so-called fall into questioning Catholic notions of sin comes not from vanity, like Milton's Eve's, but from love for the family and home that she gave up thirty years ago. Mary's rebellion against decades of renunciation suggests that even a nun needs and deserves to create memories, to love her family, to cherish her home and the wild sea. The aging Mary has been sacrificing herself too long to find it glamorous. Mary differs from her Reverend Mother, who resists leaving her convent when the Order finally allows it; only the Bishop's command convinces the Reverend Mother to go, since obedience to him against her own wishes is a kind of sacrifice in itself. Named after the Madonna, Mary rebels against the Madonna's pattern of sacrifice in a manner that might appall her Reverend Mother and Bishop. However, the choice she makes is a sacrifice of a different kind, not just one that aligns with typical Catholic ideals of femininity. That Mary's story is narrated through her perspective suggests Walsh Troy's sympathy with her. The perspective of those who might condemn Mary is omitted, nor is she caught by Reverend Mother while visiting her old home, keeping the joyous memory of her visit unspoiled.

Like Walsh Troy's story, Northern Irish writer Michael MacLaverty's “The Road to the Shore” concerns a trip away from a convent and includes an older nun who reminisces about her youth with her family at home. However, instead of focusing on a rebellious nun, MacLaverty focuses on the struggle of nuns to tolerate each other, much as family members must, despite their differences of personality and their annoying traits. Magray's study of Irish nuns from 1750–1900 sheds light on the irony of the conflicts in “Road to the Shore.” Magray writes, “On entrance, a woman gave to the [mother] superior an account of her life, including any ‘inclinations’ or ‘weaknesses’ that the superiors should know about so that they could help the woman in her striving for perfection” (47). Familial feeling was fostered to help nuns tolerate each others' flaws: “Promoting sisterly feeling was not so much an essential means of fostering love as it was a means of keeping peace in the community...a powerful principle that would persuade women to overcome aversions towards and conflict with other women” (Magray 60). Meaningful relationships between nuns were central rewards of the religious life, according to Magray (128). MacLaverty highlights the nuns', especially the Reverend Mother's, ability to function together and solve problems that come their way, no matter how seemingly trivial the issue.

In MacLaverty's story, elderly Sister Paul hopes that she won't have to sit next to young Sister Clare in the car on their annual trip to the shore, or the trip would be “like a pilgrimage” (2). But that is where Reverend Mother places her. Sister Clare behaves as Sister Paul predicted, “pestering the very soul out of me with her questions about butterflies and birds and flowers and the fall of the dew” (1). When Sister Paul sees poplars along the road, she reveals that her name is Maura and that her father named poplars after her and her siblings. She then describes her father's death, crying. Yet Sister Clare doesn't pay attention to Sister Paul's tears, but instead asks, “And what happened to the poplars?” (7).

A second example of nuns irritating each other is more trivial. Elderly Sister Francis has a habit of frequently polishing her glasses that annoys Reverend Mother. In addition
to that, on the road Sister Francis opens a bag of mints, the strong odor of which provokes Reverend Mother to roll down her window. Reflecting upon Sister Francis and Sister Clare, Reverend Mother thinks, “Somehow, for Reverend Mother, the day, that had hardly begun yet, was spoiled by an old nun with foolish habits and by a young nun unwise enough not to know when to stop questioning” (8). The nuns’ irritation makes readers see that though they might look identical when wearing their habits, they are not. Though some of the characters come across as vexatious, their individualized personalities are indicative of MacLaverty’s unique take on the lives of nuns. He foregoes a tale of large, divisive matters, but focuses on the mundane and, in so doing, exposes the obvious humanity of each nun.

When a young man riding a bicycle falls against their car because he hooks the jacket he’s carrying into his wheel, his minor injuries seem to symbolize the nuns’ disappointment with each other and their long-awaited trip. Reverend Mother shows her fine organizational ability in dealing with this crisis; though when she thinks about herself, it is with disappointment. Comparing herself with Sister Paul, Reverend Mother remarks, “For herself she had no such memories—there was nothing in her own life…only a mechanical ordering, a following of routine, that may have brought some pleasure into other people’s lives but none into her own” (8). Seeing the Total Abstinence badge the young, injured man is wearing, and hearing he is unemployed with a family to support, Reverend Mother decides to hire him as the convent’s gardener after she finds her current gardener drunk and asleep on their uncut lawn. Sister Paul “could make nothing of the greatness of Reverend Mother, and the cool way she took command of an incident that would have left the rest of them weak and confused” (10). Magray explains the important role of Reverend Mothers in Ireland’s convents of the 1700s and 1800s, “Convents were governed by a well-defined hierarchy of ‘spiritual mothers’ who led and ‘spiritual daughters’ who followed and obeyed” (49).

Later Sister Paul sees Reverend Mother with “a transfigured look on her face” as she phones the hospital to speak to the young, injured man (MacLaverty 11). Then Reverend Mother promises the nuns a trip to the shore on the following day, since that day’s trip had become a journey to the hospital. MacLaverty provides a positive view of the nuns’ community, despite their differences. When Reverend Mother realizes that had the young man died the convent would have had to try to support his widow and children (10), MacLaverty exposes the moral power of the nuns’ community. Magray points out that in the 1800s, nuns’ “influence and authority” in Ireland increased because of the land their convents held and the employment they offered to many (viii, 75). We see this role of employer continuing with MacLaverty’s Reverend Mother offering a job to the young, injured man and contemplating the possibility of helping support his family if he were to die. The charitable role of Irish nuns has roots in the 1800s, when, according to Magray, nuns “monopolized Catholic charitable enterprise” (11). The charity of the nuns has not diminished during the transition between the 1950s and 1980s, but, as MacLaverty shows us, is supplemented by the self-governance of the convents.

The challenge of tolerating fellow nuns appears not only in MacLaverty’s story but in Mary Rose Callaghan’s novel, *The Awkward Girl*. Mother Rita must deal with annoying elderly nuns like Sister Clement, who monopolizes the *Irish Times* newspaper even though she does not read it. Instead, Sister Clement sings a hymn while Mother Rita waits to take
her turn reading the newspaper. Mother Rita reflects, “Thirty odd years in the convent had taught her patience” (Callaghan 196). The novel opens with a more aggravating and serious problem with a different, elderly nun decades earlier. Sister Maggy May, a lay nun, has been caught shoplifting. After Mother Rita pays for the stolen items and talks the store manager into letting Sister Maggy May go, she explains why she stole the underwear; it had reminded her of the boy with whom she had an affair before she became a nun. Mother Rita lashes out at her, but seeing Sister Maggy May’s crestfallen face, thinks, “Dear God, what was the point of being in a convent? Of slogging for other people’s children? If she made an old woman cry?” (17). Mother Rita then asks Sister Maggy May the boy’s name.

The other dilemma Mother Rita faces is how to deal with a teenage student at the convent school, Sally Ann, who will become the novel’s protagonist. Mother Rita regards Sally Ann as a “troublemaker from 6B” who “lately had affected a tragic pose—Hamlette. It was infuriating” (8). But after being rude to Sally Ann, Mother Rita realizes “she was in the wrong with Sally Ann” (13). As an adult later in the novel, Sally Ann remembers that Mother Rita “saved me. She talked to me. She told me her mother had died too, and she understood…she understood” (75). In this Mother Rita contrasts with Sister Clement, who teaches sewing, who is in constant conflict with Sally Ann. Sally Ann recalls a similarly mixed group of nuns at her previous convent school where she had wet her bed, sleepwalked and gotten into fights after her mother died; one nun was “kind” while another “was a sadist” (75). Mother Rita likewise remembers “the fascist dictators she had known in the novitiate” (8). Their effect on Mother Rita is positive, surprisingly, for she “always tried to be fair to the children” (8), unlike the tyrannical nuns she had known.

Sally Ann’s friend, Mona, like Sally Ann, meets a nun who helps her during a crisis. Having just had a baby, Mona is depressed, and even sadder because her husband has left her. Sister Mercy, a nursing nun, smuggles cigarettes into the hospital for Mona against the rules and encourages Mona to try to get her husband back: “Are you giving in without a fight?” (171). In gratitude, Mona names her son after Sister Mercy’s favorite actor, Ronald Coleman.

Resembling Kate O’Brien’s classic novel about nuns and their students in an upper-class Irish convent school, The Land of Spices, Callaghan’s novel suggests that not only females in secular life but also nuns can grow from friendships between them. Callaghan develops this theme much further than Madden does in One by One in the Darkness. After Mother Rita is demoted to Sister Rita because Sister Maggy May shoplifted, her friendships with Sally Ann and Sister Maggy May get her through her initial humiliation. Referring to herself when Sally Ann is being criticized by Rita for lack of skill at the Irish language, Sally Ann tells Rita, “I am the Duchess of Malfi still” (200). This is the novel’s epigraph, too, a quote from Webster that Rita remembers during her own travails. Rita recalls that Sally Ann “had saved her sanity. Been her one success in a year of humility and failure. 1967, the year she’d almost left the order. The year of Maggy May’s shoplifting” (199). However, the sacrifice of her title of Mother Rita gives Rita a gift she could not have expected.

Like the Reverend Mother in MacLaverty’s “Road to the Shore,” Mother Rita finds her job “exhausting” (12) and has become numb, even to faith: “She felt nothing in the chapel now. Nothing moved her” (12). Sister Maggy May instructs Rita in “how to live in the spirit. How to love. She had been the first to comfort her after the demotion and
disgrace. Had stuck to her when the others had shunned her” (218). With Maggy May’s help, Rita’s demotion forces her to rediscover her faith and ability to love, thus becoming a kind of fortunate fall. It helps her to utilize her feminine friendships. Callaghan shows that friendships between nuns, and those between nuns and their students, play a crucial role in nuns’ lives, despite orders’ prohibitions against such friendships. In her study of eighteenth and nineteenth century Irish nuns, Mary P. Magray points out that in actual practice Irish nuns “accepted a great deal more personal affection and attachment than a reading of the official rules might lead one to believe” (52). As this period shows, the nuns in the convents were able to indulge their creation of feminine spaces.

One of Rita’s striking traits is rebellious modernity. Starting in the 1940s, many Irish nuns were finally given the freedom to attend university, according to Margaret MacCur- tain (“Godly” 249). In the 1950s, Sister Rita’s order sent her to the US for ten years to earn her PhD in literature in English. Decades later, her convent in Ireland allows Sister Rita to take a job as a lecturer at an Irish university. Mother Rita is eager after Vatican II to give up the habit, but her Mother General won’t allow this. Still, Mother Rita disobeys her by wearing a suit instead of a habit in public (7). By 1983, Mother Rita had “given up her battle for civvies, and now always wore the short brown habit and veil like the other nuns. But nothing would persuade her to give up comfortable shoes” (197). Rita ends up sacrificing her modern apparel, but she still holds on to a small vestige of it in an attempt to hold on to the agency she must have felt; she is unable to relinquish this portion of modernity.

Unlike the mature nuns in the works previously discussed, Lavin’s “Chamois Gloves” and “Eterna” concern young novices. Published during the decade of peak vocations in Ireland, the 1950s, “Chamois Gloves” is about one girl’s—Veronica’s—motivation for becoming a nun. Thomas Kilroy writes that the story is “one of the most delicate fictional treatments of girlhood in the nets of religious scruple” (xi). Veronica doubts her vocation because one of the other novices in her convent cries each night, while Veronica never does: “Where was the sacrifice if there were no pain of loss, no anguish of indecision?” (Lavin 121). Lavin shows us through Veronica’s unwillingness to hear about her sister Mabel’s childbirth two weeks before that Veronica’s motive for becoming a nun may be fear of sex and birth. She appears not to fear marriage per se, since Veronica’s parents seem a model of happiness on “the Great Day” (122) when Veronica takes her first vows as a nun. At the end of the story, while washing Mabel’s gloves that she left behind after the Great Day, Veronica realizes that what she is sacrificing in becoming a nun is the messiness of worldly experiences symbolized by the dirt on Mabel’s chamois gloves, as well as by the filthy washroom at home where Mabel and Veronica exchanged secrets while cleaning their gloves and applying their makeup: “She really was saying no to life” (132). Veronica is escaping the heterosexual pressures to marry and conceive for the feminine safe haven of the convent.

Mary P. Magray reports that in Irish convents in the 1800s, novices often brought their siblings with them into the convent (52). In Lavin’s twentieth-century story, that is not the case; instead, Veronica enters the convent where her aunt Euphemia has been a nun for twenty-seven years. But Veronica contrasts herself with her aunt, whom she thinks is behaving inappropriately when Euphemia questions Mabel’s decision to have her labor induced early so she could attend Veronica’s Great Day celebration: “Was it possible,
[Veronica] had often wondered, that for some people there was a struggle to be fought out, time after time, every day anew, even after taking the vow of chastity?” (125). As a reaction to Euphemia’s criticism of Mabel’s induced birth, Veronica’s speculations about her aunt’s and other nuns’ desires seem paranoid to say the least. Lavin is subtly questioning the reason why some women enter convents, which she does more blatantly in a later story, “Eterna.”

“Eterna” features a young, would-be nun whose vocation is art, not religion. Eterna became a novice out of gratitude to the nuns who schooled her for free and then took her in without a dowry because she can paint. Yet Eterna is destroyed by the asceticism expected of nuns. Julia Kristeva writes in her essay about the Madonna, “Stabat Mater,” that a woman’s emulation of the Virgin’s superiority can only come through the “exacerbated masochism” of “the highest sublimation alien to her body” (181). It is not Eterna’s body but her aesthetic sensibility that rails against such masochism. While a novice, she refuses advances from an eligible young doctor with horror. At the same time, as an artist, Eterna cannot stand the ugliness of the convent. Even the doctor who narrates this story observes of the convent courtyard where the nuns walk that it has “narrow asphalt paths that separated stiffly planted flower beds” (151). He asks Eterna how she, along with the other nuns, can “stand” being confined together in that convent “for the whole of their lives” (152).

In contrast with Eterna are the two elderly nuns who take turns as Eterna’s chaperon when the young doctor treats her arm for an infection that symbolically suggests that convent life is spiritually sickening her. The doctor respects the first nun, a lay sister, for the usefulness of her tribe that he has seen while working in hospitals and homes for the aged. The other nun prays so assiduously that she seems saintly to the doctor, but also seems to be moving into senility since she mistakes the doctor for a priest. Eterna comments “almost vindictively” that the old nun is “stone deaf,” for “she cannot even hear the lightning” (152). Eterna’s error suggests she fears the narrowness of convent life might eventually make her blind to nature and beauty.

Eterna breaks her pledge to be a martyr for the church to become a martyr for art: “[it was] an ordinary catalogue from the National Gallery, but she was clasping it to her bosom with all the ardour of a saint clasping a crucifix” (154). Because her desire for artistic stimulation resists sublimation through asceticism, Eterna eventually leaves the convent to live in Dublin so that she can regularly visit the National Gallery. She rejects the sacrifice she would have had to have made if she had remained in the convent. Her name suggests that art and faith will outlive materialism. The doctor who was once attracted to Eterna in part because he shared her interest in art now dismisses the ex-novice as foolish, even crazy. His wife has taught him a new set of pragmatic, materialistic values. Lavin contrasts the middle-class provincialism of the doctor and his wife with the idealism of her marginalized, independent heroine. Kristeva notes that traditionally the Virgin inspired male musicians and painters to depict her sorrow as art; in Lavin’s story Eterna becomes a woman artist, even though the doctor, like traditional male artists contemplating the Virgin, still mistakenly regards Eterna as merely an image of yearning feminine grace.

Differing from the other works discussed in that the convent is not used as a space for female agency, the tragedy of “Eterna” is that Eterna’s desertion of the Madonna myth leads to her apparent insanity, bereft of her faith, with no one to look after her as the nuns
had since she left her impoverished family. But had she married the young doctor would she have been able to pursue her art any more effectively? Perhaps Eterna would have abandoned her art for housekeeping. Eterna moves from one feminine stereotype to another—from the holy martyr to the martyred madwoman, refusing to be the conventional little wife. The doctor’s wife, Annie, who pretends to her husband that she is a righteous Virgin Mother, clings to her superiority over displaced women like Eterna. Annie is rewarded for her conformity with comfort while Eterna is punished with poverty. Speaking of her own experience of maternity, Kristeva mentions “a demented jouissance” (179). For the sake of what Kristeva might term Eterna’s jouissance in engendering art rather than children, Eterna gives up safety, status, and ultimately, sanity. The cost of rebellion is high.

Believing that a woman’s worth should be based on her conformity to social norms, the philistine doctor despises the idealistic, now seemingly “daft” Eterna who wears “outlandish clothes” for defying his views of proper womanhood (138). Eterna has expanded beyond the destructive myths spawned by patriarchal constructs of the Madonna to experience Kristevan “herethics…undeath, love” for art itself (Kristeva 185). Eterna enters the realm of the fearless new woman whom Kristeva imagines at the end of her essay. This is a realm in which churches have become art objects that inspire spiritual aspirations rather than institutions for instilling confining mental habits.

Like “Chamois Gloves,” Rita Kelly’s “T rousseau” explores reasons why Irish girls like Eterna and Veronica want to become nuns. The title, “T rousseau,” provides a clue, suggesting that marriages to men or to religious orders are parallel, not divergent, paths. Both involve buying necessary uniforms. As a novice, Kelly’s Frances needs appropriate underwear. She dreads the upcoming shopping trip because she is embarrassed by her childish figure. At the shop, the male clerk says “You must be joking” when he hears Frances’s bra size (28). When the somewhat deaf and bossy Mother Margaret loudly asks Frances to repeat her size, Frances flees to the car. Sister Oliver brings Frances her packages, along with a blue nightgown as a consolatory gift from her.

As in a few of the other stories, friendship makes convent life enjoyable in Kelly’s story. There are hints of homoeroticism too. After Sister Oliver offers to take Frances’s measurements, Frances asks “pray, Sister, to whom does the pleasure of measuring you belong?” (24). Kelly gives Sister Oliver a man’s name; Oliver is what she is usually called, not Sister Oliver. Through the name, Kelly gives a masculine dimension to Oliver that her great height, competence with cars, and independence confirm. For example, after the shop incident, Oliver tells Frances that Mother Margaret is an “Insensate old hag!” (30). Although the story confirms this judgment, Oliver, in stating such a view to a novice, does not act with the neutrality expected of nuns. After giving Frances the nightgown, Oliver reminds Frances that Mother Margaret is not “unsuspicious” (30), suggesting that there may be something for her to be suspicious about. Here, Mother Margaret stands in for the Irish mother who would monitor her daughter’s romantic relationships in the secular world. In her article on Irish women’s life-writings between 1850 and 1950, Cara Delay explains that “In the convent, young nuns—in-training formed strong connections with older sisters, creating alternative mother-daughter bonds” (21). Delay adds that “nuns…served as both mother-substitutes and the objects of schoolgirl fantasies” in convent schools (21). Discussing Irish nuns in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Mary P. Magray points out that “particular friendships were homosocial, intensely homoemotional, and at times
homoerotic relationships” (63). In this period, “particular friendships were widespread and frequent” (Magray 67). Magray also remarks that “[i]n valorizing women’s community life, religious women frequently expressed disdain for the married state” (58).

A nightgown is a rather intimate present; however, few other items of apparel are discretionary for novices. Since the gift is meant to “take the sting out of the day,” according to Oliver, it must be an item of clothing that can improve Frances’s image of her body (Kelly 30). Frances’s reaction to the nightgown is “unspeakable,” implying the painfulness of her feelings for Oliver and about her own body (30). At the story’s end, Frances looks at Oliver’s eyes reflected in the car mirror, and is “disturbed by their intensity, their chill blue” (30). The mirror represents the proper distance between Oliver and Frances that Oliver surmounts with her probing gaze that startles the insecure girl. The mirror also suggests the attraction to similarity that homoeroticism involves. Finally, the mirror suggests the approval of her body that Frances might gain through a romantic friendship with Oliver.

Frances’s trauma at the Give-'n-Take shop leads her to realize that she became a nun because of shame about her figure: “her firm advocacy of the chaste made a virtue of her deficiency” (29). Frances flees adult, heterosexual demands by becoming a nun. However, she feels some uncertainty about whether to stay in the convent, especially after Mother Margaret looks at Frances with a glance “intended for a child or pet animal” (22). But since the alternative is a heterosexual world in which Frances’s physique labels her a failure, she gratefully accepts what Marina Warner describes as the Virgin’s creation of an “image of the virginal body [which] was the supreme image of wholeness, and wholeness was equated with holiness” (72). Frances idealizes the spiritualized, virginal body because she has one. In doing so, Frances avoids an ideal that she fears—the curvaceous provocativeness of women on billboards.

Such billboards “loosened hints of envy in her, evoked desire” (Kelly 29). Is this a desire to experience the carnal pleasures known to starlets, or a lesbian lust after lovely models? In any case, Frances’s excitement about her new nightgown suggests that she has not escaped desire as she planned, but merely avoided its heterosexual focus. As the ads picture women unaccompanied by men, Frances lives in a world of women, without men as a significant presence. This frees Frances from shame over her body, but also entails new obligations to women like Oliver. Like the bride conjured by Kelly’s title, Frances discovers what marriage to Christ entails only after she has begun to prepare for the ceremony. Oliver has shown Frances that, in the convent, the limits of desire will be negotiated through covert alliances among women. That this is not what the convent is supposed to involve reveals it as a place of hidden rebellion against the self-denial promoted by the patriarchal Church. The convent, in essence, has become a safe haven for women who want to escape the harsh anxieties a heterosexual world imposes and sacrifice their potential position as a married woman. Warner argues that since the tenth century “virginity and martyrdom” have been “complementary ideals” in the Catholic Church (70). Kelly explores complex friendships between cloistered women who yearn both to suffer like the Madonna and to be happy.

Mary O’Donnell’s “Minerva’s Apprentice” presents a more positive view of nuns and their lot than the other works do. As in Edna O’Brien’s much-anthologized short story “Sister Imelda” (1981), the narrator of “Minerva’s Apprentice” is a teenager besotted with
the young nun who is her teacher. But unlike Sister Imelda, Sister Brigitta does not use Brigid’s attraction to her as a recruiting tool for the nunnery, nor does Brigitta inappropriately encourage the narrator’s affection. In O’Donnell’s story, the narrator’s best friend is not a shallow hedonist like O’Brien’s Baba; instead, Marika wants to be a doctor and explains her own attraction to Brigitta as part of growing up. The narrator tells the story in the second person--through the “you” used by teenagers with their friends--enticing readers into sympathizing with her.

O’Donnell’s narrator’s friends don’t support her aspiration to become a poet. Marika says, “Who ever heard of a woman poet?” (215). That the narrator finds inspiration during an English class with Sister Brigitta intensifies her crush on the novice. For when Brigitta asks the girls about Saint Brigid, Brigitta tells them about Brigid, the Irish goddess whose pagan celebration was replaced by the Christian feast of St. Brigid. The equivalent of Minerva, Brigid is both an art patron and a doctor; she encompasses the narrator’s and Marika’s seemingly contradictory ambitions. Living in a house that gave off a blazing light seen miles away, Brigid hung her wet, red cloak on the sun’s rays. Hearing this tale, the narrator recalls that her grandmother, another Brigid, had told her about this goddess. The narrator adds that Brigid spent her life guarding a sacred fire from men. Through a series of questions, Brigitta leads the narrator to understand that the fire was kept solely for women “because certain knowledge is for women only” (214). The other students think the narrator has given a stupid answer, but Brigitta is delighted with it, commenting on how lucky the narrator is to have such a wise grandmother.

After this encounter, Brigid, the narrator, regards Brigitta as her “champion” (215). Brigid and Marika are crushed when they find out the novice will leave their convent as soon as she becomes a nun. The night before Brigitta is to take her final vows, Marika and the narrator steal into a storeroom to look in Brigitta’s suitcase; all they find are a few seashells from the small fishing village from which the novice came. They are caught by “an insomniac nun” and punished, but in their grief, they barely notice (218).

That O’Donnell’s story ends with Brigid writing a poem after Brigitta has left suggests that the nun inspired the young writer: “wanting to hang your wet cloak—if you had one—on the sun’s rays, to keep the fire burning brilliant, knowing an arsenal of words could change much that was painful” (219). The significance of the story’s title becomes clear: Brigitta has taught the narrator to transform suffering into wisdom, empowering Brigid as a creator. Their namesake, Brigid the goddess, is the model for both the nun and the narrator. For the narrator, the Irish goddess melds into the Christian saint through the figure of the nun, Brigitta. Although as a nun she must defer to priests, Sister Brigitta knows that there is wisdom that is women’s alone. Because of knowing Sister Brigitta, young Brigid can cherish what is most admirable about female saints, but can also admire the dynamic power of the ancient goddess. When the narrator and Marika dream about Sister Brigitta’s future, they imagine the nun transforming the distant worlds of San Francisco or Africa, as a goddess might. Brigitta is not only their love object, but their model for deviating from traditional female roles. In “Minerva’s Apprentice,” the central nun is not a follower of men, but a leader of women. Mary P. Magray explores the effect of such appealing female religious leaders on Irish convents during the 1700s and 1800s. “Convents with charismatic leaders tended to thrive because they became dynamic places for women to spend their lives” (Magray 50). Whereas Walsh Troy laments that the Irish
The Catholic ideal of femininity rests on submission, O’Donnell’s goddess and the nun who admires her offer an alternative ideal that venerates women’s intellect. Rosemary Raughter presents a similarly appreciative view of Irish nuns, “Throughout the centuries, and in defiance of their secondary status in institutional religion, pious females have drawn from their faith not only spiritual sustenance and emotional support but justification for assertiveness and for initiative” (3). Along similar lines, Mary P. Magray argues that in Ireland “the religious life became the principle vehicle by which female influence and authority were expressed in the nineteenth century” (74).

Kelly and Lavin suggest that having a vocation is not always the reason why a woman becomes a novice. Instead, erotic, economic or familial reasons may prevail, especially when girls seek to avoid the threats posed by adult sexual relationships. Enlistment for the convent at times stems from the appeal of the impossible ideal of self-denial created by the Madonna. Enthroning the Virgin, Irish culture—as depicted by Kelly and O’Donnell—idealizes nuns. Kelly’s protagonist feels that she will be superior to sexually available women if she follows the Virgin by dedicating herself to Christ. However, Kelly suggests that the novice’s view is a naive self-deception. That girls sometimes have tawdry reasons for entering the convent demonstrates the elusiveness of the Madonna ideal.

The young women in these works see the convent as an alternative to the world of male predation and domination. Kelly portrays the convent as an alternative world of women that echoes the emotional complexities of the modern heterosexual arena. Mary Lavin, Una Walsh Troy, Rita Kelly, Mary Rose Callaghan, Deirdre Madden, and Mary O’Donnell depict nuns who rebel against stereotypical submissiveness. O’Donnell, Callaghan, Lavin (in “Eterna”) and Madden focus on the effect of a charismatic nun upon people in secular life rather than on the dynamics among nuns that interest Walsh Troy, MacLaverty, and Kelly. In all these works, nuns become individuals, deviating from the homogenizing trend in the perception of nuns described by J.J. Lee: “the desexualisation of women in general had its counterpart in the depersonalisation of nuns in particular in the Irish imagination” (136). Arguably, Sister Brigitta is the most admirable nun in the short stories discussed here. Brigitta’s liberating impact upon her students suggests that the convent does not have to be the place of disempowerment seen in Walsh Troy’s story; nor must the complex, erotic ties among women that Kelly depicts necessarily be fruitless, whereas in the other works, nuns display autonomy within the confines of the convent without the liberation O’Donnell illustrates. The sacrificial requirement that nuns face can be surprisingly rewarding, as Brigitta shows in developing her agency as a woman. As a mentor, O’Donnell’s Brigitta is peerless.

When traits of an Irish goddess are combined with the most inspiring facets of the Madonna, the convent school can become a place of growth, a world of women that fortifies girls so that they can learn to deal confidently with men. Such an argument for a convent education resembles studies of American women’s colleges that prove their ability to produce autonomous, articulate graduates. In an era when orders of nuns are closing due to a lack of recruits, O’Donnell shows the value of an antique way of life that is becoming increasingly rare. In “Minerva’s Apprentice,” O’Donnell delivers women from gothic entrapment. Like two of O’Donnell’s novels, The Virgin and the Boy (1996) and The Lightmakers (1993), her short story depicts women integrating ancient traditions with new freedoms that result from the feminist movement and Ireland’s increasing
assimilation of European mores. Though the fiction discussed in this essay was written during a transitory period, it demonstrates how feminine expression can manifest itself in the most improbable of places, flourishing despite that.

**Works Cited**


