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LANGUAGE

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Linguistic Picture of Magdalene Asylums in the Victorian Press[1]

Abstract. The Victorian era in Britain witnessed a multitude of dramatic changes. Industrialisation spurred urbanisation, leading to radical class divisions and the pauperisation of the lower class. Prudishness and moral constraints inflicted by religion were pervasive, particularly affecting marginalised groups such as sex workers, who were condemned for their actions and directed to the so-called rehabilitation institutions like Magdalene asylums. Established by the Catholic Church, these homes purported to provide refuge for *fallen women* but often perpetuated abuse and mistreatment (Pickard 2011, 80). Simultaneously, the era saw a surge in mass literacy and the increasing popularity of the press, which served as a medium of expression, reflecting the beliefs and views of its readership, including opinions on Magdalene asylums. This study aims to uncover these sentiments by analysing the language used to describe the institutions, their personnel, and penitents, as seen in newspapers published between 1843 and 1868. The examination of contemporary press coverage reveals a prevailing perception of the sisterhood's philanthropic efforts as life-saving, with scant criticism directed towards their work. Conversely, women in the asylums were often portrayed as burdens, their predicament viewed not as a conscious choice but as a result of fate or unintentional error. The conducted analysis demonstrates how such descriptions could reinforce societal taboos and absolve those in authority of responsibility for perpetuating economic disparities among the most vulnerable social strata.

Keywords: Magdalene asylums, Victorian press, fallen women, philanthropy

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1. Introduction

The Victorian era was a time of rapid transformation in Great Britain, encompassing political, economic, and cultural changes. Many of these developments stemmed from technological advancements under the Industrial Revolution. The influx of people into urban areas led to the massive growth of the working class, whose members soon became subjects to overpopulation, underpayment, and unemployment. Poverty was a cause of the emerging social problems, one of which was prostitution – a potential source of extra income. In response, the government, middle- and upper-class Victorians, and the Church, undertook various measures to address the issue. These included introducing legislation, establishing charities, and creating rehabilitative institutions. Among the latter were Magdalene asylums, led mostly by the Roman Catholic Church, which in numerous cases became sites of abuse, mistreatment, and exploitation.

Another consequence of 19th-century urbanisation was the flourishing press industry. Publishing became increasingly profitable as demand, driven by mass literacy, continued to grow. The development and accessibility of the press allowed Victorians to stay informed and engage in discussions about current affairs, including social issues. Press discourse became a reflection of the prevalent Victorian state of mind. This article aims to explore that mindset, focusing on attitudes toward the Magdalene asylums, their staff, and the penitents. The analysis will be conducted through an examination of expressions found in newspapers published in London between 1843 and 1868.

2. Sociohistorical Background

The Victorian era, spanning the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901, was a period marked by the Industrial Revolution, which spurred urbanisation and led to a demographic boom (Steinbach 2012, 3). Rapid population growth and migration to urban centres resulted in overpopulation, which was soon to be followed by the degradation of living conditions due to poor sanitation, housing issues, and unemployment. These factors induced strict social divisions and stark differences in living standards within the Victorian society, with the working class being the primary victims.

In the 19th century, labourers made up the majority of the British population (Steinbach 2012, 128). Most were employed in agriculture, many were domestic servants, and others worked in factories (Mitchell 1996, 42). Women of the lower class also contributed to family income, driven by the extremely low wages earned by semi-skilled and unskilled male workers (Burnett 2002). According to the 1851 Census, whose data is likely understated, 2.8 million women and girls over the age of ten were employed, forming about 30% of the labour force (Burnett 2002).

Working opportunities for women, especially those unskilled and from disadvantaged family backgrounds, were extremely limited (Murdoch 2014, 190). During the 19th century, codes of morality regulated women's access to labour; jobs were scarce for

single women, and certain occupations, deemed unfeminine, were considered degrading (Murdoch 2014, 190). Consequently, apart from the factories, women often worked as domestic servants, seamstresses, or washerwomen (Burnett 2002). Mothers typically gave up a full-time employment, instead earning money through piecework or by taking in lodgers (Burnett 2002, Mitchell 1996, 20). The majority of the working class led a hand-to-mouth existence; a sudden misfortune, illness, or layoff could easily plunge them into poverty.

Faced with such prospects, some Victorian women – primarily teenage girls above the age of 16 and young women from the middle and, mostly, working class – resorted to prostitution as a means of survival, though the consequences of this choice could be severe (Walkowitz 1991, 17). During this period, sex work was viewed as *the great social evil* – a danger to society as a whole (Attwood 2011, 6). The government associated prostitution with declining health and effectiveness of military forces, blaming it for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Therefore, to address this, the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869 were introduced (Hall 2000, 22). As a consequence, under these laws, women identified as sex workers could be forcibly subjected to medical examinations, and if found to have a sexually transmitted disease, detained in hospitals (McHugh 2013, 16ff.). Beyond legal repercussions, women could also suffer violence and abuse, particularly those working in the streets, as opposed to those in soldiers' encampments or brothels, who were provided with some level of protection (Walkowitz 1991, 23ff.).

Prostitution was also condemned on moral and religious grounds, as it broke the Victorian ideals of chastity and submissiveness. Sex workers used their bodies for financial gain and operated in the public sphere, which was traditionally reserved for men, thus disrupting the social order on multiple levels. From a religious perspective, prostitution was considered a sin. Consequently, various measures were undertaken by charities and the Church to prevent it and reform the sex workers, the latter achieved through establishment of philanthropic institutions.

Magdalene asylums, also known as Magdalene laundries, were intended to rehabilitate *fallen women* and reintegrate them into society (Himmelfarb 1997, 49). Their origins can be traced back to the Middle Ages, when Magdalene convents for penitents were endorsed by Pope Gregory IX in a papal bull of 1227 (McCarthy 2010, 7). The patron of these institutions was Mary Magdalene, a Catholic symbol of a *fallen woman* saved by the grace of God. Over time, these convents evolved into workhouses, hospitals, and halfway houses, often reinforced by state laws and co-founded by private philanthropies (McCarthy 2010, 8).

The women referred to as Magdalenes or penitents were supposed to voluntarily enter the houses, and in the 19th century, approximately 66% did so (Luddy 1997, 497). The remaining were usually placed in the asylums by their families due to perceived immorality, such as "unmarried motherhood, rape, incest, and sexual abuse," or by the police, who used the asylums as alternatives to prison for crimes like prostitution or concealing birth (Luddy 1997, 497, Smith 2007, 31). Once there, the women were expected to repent and reform (Pickard 2011, 79f.).

In the asylums, women were segregated into classes based on their education, previous lifestyle, duration of stay, or the degree of penitence they displayed. They were given new names to symbolise a disconnection from their *sinful* past lives (Luddy 1997, 493ff.). The Magdalenes were taught various skills intended to help them find employment after leaving the institutions. Their primary task was washing the townspeople's laundry, which is why the asylums were also known as laundries. The women were not paid for their work; instead, the income they generated supported the institution (Pickard 2011, 80). The work, performed in silence, was meant to symbolise the cleansing of their souls and the washing away of their sins (Pickard 2011, 80, Luddy 1997, 496). Apart from the economic exploitation, Magdalene survivors have reported widespread mistreatment, including malnutrition, neglect, as well as physical and mental abuse[2] (McLaughlin 2017).

In the 20th century, the number of prostitutes rapidly decreased, leading the asylums to focus on unmarried women, victims of rape, sexually active unmarried women, adulteresses, and women "predisposed to sin," often due to their attractiveness (Luddy 1997, 499). The last Magdalene laundry, the Convent of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity in Dublin, closed on the 25th of October 1996 (Hertz 2019). However, the efforts of Magdalene survivors to seek justice for the mistreatment they endured in these institutions, continue to this day (Hertz 2019).

3. Data and Analysis

This section presents an analysis of linguistic expressions used to describe the Magdalene asylums, their staff, and the penitents, as found in Victorian newspapers published between 1843 and 1868. The data for this analysis was derived from the contemporary Victorian press, which, due to the massive expansion of the industry, became a medium of significant influence and reach (Steinbach 2012, 235ff.).

During the 19th century, newspapers became a profitable business, driven by rising literacy rates and the subsequent mass demand for reports on current events and printed materials covering various subjects (Taunton 2014). Increased literacy, especially among the middle and working classes, made the press a vital platform for Victorians to both form and express their opinions (Taunton 2014). The effect of this phenomenon was the emergence of "New Journalism" in the 1880s, characterised by bold headlines, illustrations, and sensational content designed to attract the new readership (Steinbach 2012, 235ff.). This style frequently included melodramatic, entertaining, and scandalous reports, often touching upon mishaps or crimes (Steinbach 2012, 235ff.). The lurid coverage of the "Jack the Ripper" murders in 1888, which propelled Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper to a circulation of nearly 900,000 copies per week, being an emblematic example (Steinbach 2012, 235ff.).

[2] In 2001, the Irish Government admitted that the asylums were institutions of abuse (Hertz 2019).

"New Journalism" was also participatory, encouraging readers to write to the paper, express their opinions, seek advice, and participate in contests, fostering a sense of community and giving the working class the illusion of agency in political debate (Steinbach 2012, 235ff.). However, this broad appeal also brought loud criticism, with commentators disapproving of the new style, lamenting the end of serious journalism, and condemning the shift from educating to entertaining the public (Steinbach 2012, 235ff.).

3.1. Materials and Methods

The newspapers selected for this study were issued in London, which, during the Victorian period, experienced a significant influx of people, particularly workers seeking employment. As a result, the press industry in London was highly developed, publishing the greatest number of newspapers to meet the demand of a large and diverse readership (Taunton 2014).

The study focuses on the years 1843-1868, as the majority of publications on the subject were produced between the beginning of the Victorian era in 1819 until 1868, with the period from 1839 to 1868 particularly abundant in articles on the topic. The number of publications on Magdalene asylums began to gradually decrease from 1864 onwards, coinciding with the introduction of the first Contagious Diseases Act, followed by subsequent acts in later years (Hall 2000, 22).

The data for this analysis were collected via The British Newspaper Archive, a website that contains around three million pages of digitalised newspapers published in the United Kingdom since 1800 (The British Newspaper Archive 2021). Using the search phrases "Magdalen[e] asylum" and "Magdalen[e] hospital," 56 legible articles related to Magdalene institutions were identified. After a detailed review, 38 articles were excluded due to insufficient amount of relevant text on the topic, leaving 18 articles selected for further analysis. Details of these articles are presented below[3].

Table 1. Data on the articles used for the analysis

Reference	Title	Date of publication	Theme of the article
A2	Weekly Dispatch (London)	1843	female servants
A1	Tablet	1846	consecration of the chapel
A12	Tablet	1846	news from Ireland
B7	Morning Advertiser	1848	a letter from a reader
B5	Morning Chronicle	1851	a letter from a reader associated with the asylum (a priest?)
A8	London Evening Standard	1854	procession because of the establishment of an asylum

[3] The excerpts from the selected texts analysed in this study and referenced in the table are included in the appendix.

Reference	Title	Date of publication	Theme of the article
A6	Saint James's Chronicle	1856	letter about prostitution and the newspaper's response
B2	Saint James's Chronicle	1859	asking for donations
B6	South London Chronicle	1860	asking for a refuge to be built in South London
A10	Kentish Independent	1862	men as seducers
A18	Saint James's Chronicle	1862	a public meeting for ladies about the institution
B1	London Evening Standard	1862	10th anniversary celebration
A11	Tablet	1865	asking for donations
A16	Pall Mall Gazette	1866	criticism of the institution
A13	Tablet	1867	asking for donations
A14	Globe	1868	asking for donations
B3	Morning Advertiser	1868	asking the Parliament for action
B4	South London Chronicle	1868	asking for donations

From these texts, 177 tokens were identified that included an opinion on at least one of the following five subjects: asylums, staff, service, penitents, and the penitents' past. These examples were then grouped into categories based on their themes. Two primary categories emerged: "religion" and "moral evaluation," each containing several subcategories. Additionally, nine other categories were identified that did not fit into the main two and were collectively grouped as "others." Categories and subcategories with fewer than ten examples were excluded from the analysis. The final dataset is presented below, ordered by the number of examples within each category, from the most to the least numerous.

Table 2. Categorisation and the number of expressions

Category	Number of expressions
religion	**45**
good	24
sin	11
fall	10
moral evaluation	**43**
fortune	12
evil	11
wretched	10
poor	10
others	**29**
undoing	18
dehumanising	11

3.2. Analysis

In this section, the results of the linguistic analysis are presented. The examples were categorised based on their themes and further subdivided by the subject matter for the purpose of the cohesion of the analysis.

3.2.1. Moral Evaluation

The vast majority of examples presented a moral evaluation of both the Magdalenes as well as the nuns providing their services. Victorian society was characterised by strict moral rules, largely shaped by religion. Consequently, prudery and restraint dictated public discourse, which was reflected in moralising and opinionated language of the press.

3.2.2. Misery

The following examples pertain to the misery of women admitted to the Magdalene laundries. These phrases commonly use epithets consisting of an attributive adjective and a noun, such as "girls," "females," "individuals," or "class" (1). The most frequently used adjective when referring to the penitents was "unfortunate." This euphemism likely disguises prostitution, poverty, and ostracism, thereby conforming to the social taboos of the time. Additionally, its use might indicate sympathy and compassion, especially when paired with the noun "girl" (1a). Simultaneously, the adjective implies that the women's experiences were a matter of fate. Thus, the use of "unfortunate" may be seen as a sign of leniency or perhaps sympathy toward an inferior social class (1d).

(1)
a. *poor* ***unfortunate*** *girls*[4], *the* ***unfortunate*** *girl*[5]
b. ***unfortunate*** *women*[6], ***unfortunate*** *females*[7]
c. ***unfortunate*** *individuals*[8]
d. ***the most unfortunate*** *class*[9]
e. *the unfortunate*[10], ***the unfortunates*** *upon the streets*[11], ***the unfortunate*** *and the repentant*[12]

Often, the authors referred to the women as "wretched" – sorrowful, tormented, and miserable – and described their lives as "wretchedness" – marked by unhappiness and discomfort. These euphemisms were used to imply prostitution, adultery, or unchastity without directly naming these conditions. Instead, expressions associated with distress, poor reputation, and rejection were adopted, as illustrated in (2). The adjectives

[4] B7, 20 Nov. 1848
[5] B3, 5 Feb. 1868
[6] B7, 20 Nov. 1848, B3, 5 Feb. 1868
[7] B5, 18 Aug. 1851
[8] B7, 20 Nov. 1848
[9] B5, 18 Aug. 1851
[10] B2, 21 May 1859
[11] B3, 5 Feb. 1868
[12] A12, 2 May 1846

were most likely intended to evoke an emotional response in readers, eliciting pity or fear, consistent with the nineteenth-century press's trend toward sensationalism.

(2)
a. *wretchedness*[13], *infamy and* ***wretchedness***[14], *vice and* ***wretchedness***[15]
b. *many a* ***wretched*** *being*[16], *the fallen and the* ***wretched***[17], *these* ***wretched*** *fallen ones*[18], ***wretched****, fallen, infamous women*[19], ***the wretched***[20], *the* ***wretched*** *being*[21], ***wretched*** *outcasts from society*[22]

Another frequently employed adjective was "poor." While it literally denoted the economic status of the impoverished women, interpreted as a euphemism, it concealed the hardships they endured and conveyed either a commiserating or patronising attitude towards them.

(3)
a. *the* ***poor*** *creatures*[23], ***poor*** *abandoned women*[24], *the* ***poor*** *penitent*[25], ***poor*** *unfortunate girls*[26], ***poor*** *destitute females*[27], *the* ***poor*** *creatures of the street*[28], *many a* ***poor*** *girl*[29], *many a* ***poor*** *Catholic outcast*[30]

The adjectives mentioned above were often accompanied by terms such as "women" (1b, 2b, 3a), "females" (1b, 3a), and "penitents" (3a). Dehumanising expressions like "creatures" (3a) and "being" (2b) were also used, as well as nouns that emphasised the distance between the authors, readers, and the group in question, such as "ones" (2b) and "individuals" (1b). Another reoccurring noun was "outcasts" (2b, 3a), which underscored the alienation of the Magdalenes.

[13] B7, 20 Nov. 1848
[14] A16, 12 Jan. 1866
[15] A10, 11 Jan. 1862, A12, 2 May 1846
[16] A1, 15 Aug 1846
[17] B6, 14 Apr. 1860
[18] A18, 2 Jan. 1862
[19] A18, 2 Jan. 1862
[20] B6, 14 Apr. 1860
[21] A18, 2 Jan. 1862
[22] B1, 29 May 1862
[23] A2, 23 Jul 1843, A8, 3 Jul. 1854, A6, 26 Apr. 1856
[24] B7, 20 Nov. 1848
[25] B7, 20 Nov. 1848
[26] B7, 20 Nov. 1848
[27] B7, 20 Nov. 1848
[28] A6, 26 Apr. 1856
[29] A16, 12 Jan. 1866
[30] A6, 26 Apr. 1856

3.2.3. Evil

The juxtaposition of good and evil, stemming from religious beliefs, was often utilised to praise the institutions and their staff while condemning the penitents. The noun "evil" denoted the past of the women who lived in the asylums, commonly referring to prostitution. To accentuate the perceived threat of sex work, authors employed metaphors such as EVIL IS A BEING, presented in (4c). In these instances, evil is personified and takes the form of either a person or an animal that confronts its victims face-to-face.

(4)
a. *so great an evil*[31]
b. *the social evil*[32]
c. *evil stared them in the face*[33], *evil staring you in the face*[34]
d. *the horror of this evil*[35]
e. *evil courses*[36]

3.2.4. Religion

Many examples found in the source texts can be associated with religion, as the Magdalene asylums, although initially operated mostly by laywomen, later came under the management of nuns and were only partially funded by private donors (McCarthy 2010, 8, Smith 2007, 25f.). Consequently, a large number of expressions refer to religiosity and employ religious nomenclature.

3.2.4.1. Good

While the actions of the women admitted to the asylums were condemned by the press, the staff of the Magdalene laundries was glorified. The nuns were lauded as being inspired by the grace of a forgiving God (5a), acting in his service (5b), and under his guidance (5c).

(5)
a. *inspired with an ardent love of their Redeemer*[37]
b. *devoted […] to his service alone*[38]
c. *humble followers*[39]

[31] B7, 20 Nov. 1848
[32] B5, 18 Aug. 1851
[33] A10, 11 Jan. 1862
[34] A18, 2 Jan. 1862
[35] A18, 2 Jan. 1862
[36] A18, 2 Jan. 1862
[37] A1, 15 Aug 1846
[38] A1, 15 Aug 1846
[39] A6, 26 Apr. 1856

Characterising their efforts as good deeds or sacred acts in a biblical sense, as depicted in (6), was a manner of expressing appreciation for the work of the sisterhood. The staff was considered merciful (6a), while the establishments were described as houses where the women would be shown mercy (6a). The service of the sisterhood was depicted as a paragon of virtue that fellow Christians should emulate (6b), and as a tangible proof of faith through the metaphor SERVICE IS TESTIMONY (6b). Another tendency was the use of hyperbole, for example, when describing the sisterhood's work as characteristic of God (6d) or typical of all Christians (6c). These pompous expressions and metaphors often amounted to one-sided and, in a broader context, unfounded glorifications of institutional aid. A more neutral way of expressing appreciation for the work of the Magdalene sisters was referring to it simply as "good" (6e).

(6)

a. *work of mercy*[40], *a house of mercy*[41]

b. *nothing can be imagined more worthy of generous and Christian men*[42], *the testimony*[43]

c. *the Christian kindness and firmness*[44]*, a standing monument of Christian philanthropy*[45]

d. *the most glorious work of their Divine master*[46], *holy task*[47]

e. *much good*[48], *such a vast amount of good*[49], *among the most hopeful methods of doing good*[50]

3.2.4.2. Wrong

Contrary to the portrayal of the service provided by the staff of the asylums as good deeds, the actions of their penitents were frequently labelled as sins, as presented in (7). By applying religious nomenclature when describing the penitents, journalists were likely influenced by the trend of sensationalism, often using metaphors and hyperboles to dramatise the women's lives, as seen in the expression "the dying sinner" (7b).

40 A12, 2 May 1846, A14, 23 Apr. 1868
41 B5, 18 Aug. 1851
42 A8, 3 Jul. 1854
43 B3, 5 Feb. 1868
44 A14, 23 Apr. 1868
45 B2, 21 May 1859
46 A6, 26 Apr. 1856
47 A6, 26 Apr. 1856
48 B1, 29 May 1862
49 B1, 29 May 1862
50 B2, 21 May 1859

(7)
a. *the unfortunate and* ***the repentant***[51], *a place for* ***repentance***[52], *the repentant sinner*[53]
b. *the dying* ***sinner***[54]*, sinner*[55]
c. *children of* ***sin*** *and sorrow*[56]
d. *the unhappy* ***victim of sin***[57]
e. *sin*[58], *crime and* ***sin***[59]
f. *there are far more sinned against than sinning*[60]

Another prevalent practice was describing the women of Magdalene laundries using the metaphorical concept of falling. These terms are based on the very common orientational metaphor of BAD IS DOWN. Downward movement is frequently associated with negativity, moral decline, sin, and evil. It is closely tied to the perception of the biblical hell as being located in the underworld, leading to the idea that sinners fall rather than rise. The expression "fallen women" serves as a synonym for "prostitutes," and by extension, for "Magdalenes." The religious connotation behind this metaphor explains why it was so widely used in the period in question.

(8)
a. *fall*[61]
b. *the fallen*[62], *the "fallen"*[63], *wretched, fallen, infamous women*[64], *the fallen and the wretched*[65], *these wretched fallen ones*[66], *wretched, fallen, infamous women*[67]
c. *young women who have fallen into error*[68]
d. *raising those who have fallen the lowest*[69]

[51] A12, 2 May 1846
[52] B6, 14 Apr. 1860
[53] B3, 5 Feb. 1868
[54] A1, 15 Aug 1846
[55] A13, 21 Dec 1867
[56] A11, 24 Jun. 1865
[57] A13, 21 Dec 1867
[58] B6, 14 Apr. 1860
[59] A8, 3 Jul. 1854
[60] B2, 21 May 1859
[61] A18, 2 Jan. 1862, B3, 5 Feb. 1868
[62] B7, 20 Nov. 1848, B6, 14 Apr. 1860
[63] A14, 23 Apr. 1868
[64] A16, 12 Jan. 1866
[65] B6, 14 Apr. 1860
[66] A18, 2 Jan. 1862
[67] A18, 2 Jan. 1862
[68] B2, 21 May 1859
[69] A6, 26 Apr. 1856

The lifestyle of the penitents before admission was often characterised as "the fall," as illustrated in (8a). In consequence, the women themselves were referred to as "the fallen women" or simply "the fallen" (8b). In one of the articles, prostitution was metaphorically and euphemistically described as "falling into error" (8c). This phrase suggests that the action was unintentional and caused by external factors, thus denying the women their agency. In (8d), the author adopted the metaphor of SAD IS DOWN, combining it with the contrasting orientational metaphor HAPPY IS UP. Here, the salvation of women by the sisterhood was described as "raising" those who had "fallen the lowest," thereby expressing appreciation for the service of the nuns while simultaneously depreciating the women in the institutions.

3.2.5. Undoing

The examples exhibited below highlight the processes aimed at rehabilitating the women into society through acts which, according to the analysed accounts, took place in the Magdalene asylums. In numerous articles, this service was described as "reformation" (9), which could refer to reforming either the morals or the social position of the penitents.

(9)
a. *places of refuge and reform*[70]
b. *the door of reformation*[71]
c. *a reformatory for fallen women*[72]
d. *a reformatory*[73]
e. *relief and reformation*[74]
f. *the reformation of the "fallen"*[75]
g. *work of reformation*[76]

In (9b), a conceptual metaphor of the door was employed – THE DOOR IS A CHANCE. The door represents the institution and the opportunity for reform that it offers. It is supposed to lead the women to a better life than the one they currently have. Other expressions refer to the process of repairing, implying that the women were previously broken and therefore require fixing (10a). In various articles, the service of the sisterhood was described as "reclaiming," compelling the reader to perceive the women

[70] B7, 20 Nov. 1848
[71] B5, 18 Aug. 1851
[72] A16, 12 Jan. 1866
[73] B3, 5 Feb. 1868
[74] B2, 21 May 1859
[75] A14, 23 Apr. 1868
[76] A14, 23 Apr. 1868

as formerly lost (10b). In other instances, it was not the women themselves but their virtues that were portrayed as being in need of recovery (10c).

(10)
a. *home wherein to repair the past*[77]
b. *reclamation and salvation of women*[78], *reclaiming*[79]
c. *an opportunity of recovering her virtue, and becoming a respectable member of society*[80]
d. *restored them to peace and happiness in this life*[81]

3.2.6. Dehumanising

In these fragments, the women were deprived of their human qualities through the use of expressions such as "creatures" (11a), which is both euphemistic and patronising. Such language alienated the women and established a hierarchy wherein the authors of the articles positioned themselves above the women they described, who were cast as *the other*. In (11b), a degrading metaphor – A WOMAN IS AN OBJECT – was employed. Sex workers were often objectified, dehumanised, deprived of morals, and assigned an unattractive physical appearance. They were characterised as objects to be feared. Another term used for the penitents was "being," which evidenced a patronising approach by the author and served as a means for speaking about the women impersonally. In (11d), a conceptual metaphor – A WOMAN IS DIRT – is applied. The author aligned themselves with the "proper" segment of society and spoke on its behalf in the first person plural. Simultaneously, the women of the asylums were depicted as a "blot," a stain of dirt on society. The metaphor seen in (11f) adopts religious nomenclature to speak of the women as lost sheep. This allusion to the biblical Parable of the Lost Sheep is used to portray the women as outcasts who wandered off and erred, while the rest of the society is implicitly regarded as righteous.

(11)
a. *the poor creatures*[82], *the poor creatures of the street*[83]
b. *objects equally horrifying to morals and sight*[84]
c. *many a wretched being*[85], *the wretched being*[86]

[77] A11, 24 Jun. 1865
[78] B5, 18 Aug. 1851
[79] B3, 5 Feb. 1868
[80] B5, 18 Aug. 1851
[81] A14, 23 Apr. 1868
[82] A2, 23 Jul 1843, A8, 3 Jul. 1854, A6, 26 Apr. 1856
[83] A6, 26 Apr. 1856
[84] A2, 23 Jul 1843
[85] A1, 15 Aug 1846
[86] A18, 2 Jan. 1862

d. *a blot upon us*[87]
e. *these wretched fallen ones*[88]
f. *lost sheep*[89]

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The Victorian era was a revolutionary period for Great Britain. Industrialisation and subsequent processes transformed the lives of many Britons, exacerbating the already-existent class divisions. The worst-off groups were often faced with the threat of absolute poverty, leading some to seek ways to alleviate their situation and resort to prostitution. Sex work was met with rejection and ostracism by more affluent Victorians. To reclaim these women from the streets, philanthropic institutions such as Magdalene asylums opened their doors to former sex workers with the aim of rehabilitation. However, the laundries soon began to exploit the women and profit from their coercion.

The asylums and their penitents were the subjects of numerous press reports, the expressions used in which are analysed in this article, revealing contemporary authors' attitudes towards the issue. Opinions of the penitents of the Magdalene asylums, found in the analysed texts, were predominantly negative, though occasionally compassionate. Driven by their beliefs, journalists often resorted to religious nomenclature to describe the sin and evil attributed to the Magdalenes. Their hardships were frequently characterised as a *fall* – both in terms of morality and social status. The lifestyle of the Magdalenes was not reported in detail and was often depicted as inherently evil.

The authors adopted a moralising approach, classifying the women as *poor*, *unfortunate*, and *wretched*. Writers who were harsher in their judgements used dehumanising language to refer to the women, many of whom were former prostitutes. Nevertheless, voices of compassion were also present. In multiple articles, the authors expressed sympathy and concern for the difficult circumstances in which the women found themselves, often identifying lack of fortune as the root cause of their problems. However, such descriptions reinforced societal taboos and absolved officials responsible for creating a situation where the lowest social groups were at a distinct economic disadvantage from their blame.

By contrast, Victorians generally held a positive opinion of the institutions. The work of the Magdalene asylums was praised and widely appreciated, recognised as a good deed in the eyes of God. Members of the sisterhood were considered role models for Christians, regarded as responsible for returning the women to a rightful path and lifting them from their misery.

[87] A8, 3 Jul. 1854
[88] A18, 2 Jan. 1862
[89] B3, 5 Feb. 1868

Language-wise, journalists employed various means to communicate their opinions. In addition to prevalent noun phrases, many articles contained metaphorical and euphemistic expressions. Presumably, the authors sought to evoke respect, compassion, or pity in their readership, or conversely, to induce negative emotions towards the women in the asylums.

The linguistic analysis of the expressions from 19th-century newspapers allows us to reconstruct the predominant Victorian mindset. It demonstrates that Victorian society was characterised by strong class divisions, which resulted in criticism of the underprivileged. It also suggests that religion played a significant role in the everyday lives of Victorians. Religious teachings were reflected in the conservative views of the authors, whose dogmatic judgements, subjective, often unfounded, descriptions shaped popular opinion about the Magdalenes, the sisterhood, and the service they provided. Therefore, it can be assumed that the lives of the women who lived and worked in the Magdalene asylums were extremely difficult, affected by the widespread prejudice in Victorian society. On the other hand, the service of the sisterhood was highly valued and esteemed. The public appeared to be convinced that the asylums were in fact helpful and effective, with criticism of the laundries rarely stated openly.

It is worth noting, however, that the data on which this analysis is based is limited to articles whose scans were legible. Moreover, considering the social status that the vast majority of contemporary journalists likely enjoyed, the results cannot be considered exhaustive, as they reflect the views of only a part of the privileged and educated members of Victorian society. The attitudes of other social classes toward this issue remain an area open for exploration in future research.

Appendix

Appendix 1. Excerpts from selected texts analysed in the study

Reference	Excerpt
A11	"The Sisters of Mercy trust that the kind of friends who have on many occasions aided them in alleviating the wants of the dear poor confided to their care, will now extend a benevolent hand to the many destitute creatures who call on them for relief."
A12	"The Magdalen Asylum–that resource of the unfortunate and the repentant–the refuge to which they can fly from vice and wretchedness, and be sure of reception"
B2	"Next to untainted virtue, nothing commands our respect more than genuine contrition, and since the inducement of contrition is the main object of the Magdalen Hospital, we venture to assert that few charities in the neighbourhood of London can have stronger claims on the attention and support of the wealthy. Its mission is to young women who have fallen into error, and as such institutions are among the most hopeful methods of doing good, we look upon this Asylum as a standing monument of Christian philanthropy"
B3	"No subject of greater importance can occupy the attention of philanthropists than the reclamation from vice of all who have had the misfortune to fall into its habitual practice."

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