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Religious Celibacy, Coerced Asexuality, and Catholic Nunhood: A Comparative Study of *The Runner Stumbles* and *Agnes of God*

Abstract. The representations of Catholic nuns in American theatre often rely on familiar tropes, portraying them either as devout, selfless caregivers or as harsh, ruler-wielding nun teachers. However, the portrayal of sexually repressed nuns on stage, as well as the scholarly analyses of sexual repression embedded within these characters, remains significantly underexplored. The present study seeks to address this gap by critically examining these portrayals and their broader implications within the context of religious and psychological narratives. The study investigates the effects of religious celibacy and coerced asexuality among Catholic nuns as depicted in Milan Stitt's *The Runner Stumbles* (1976) and John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God* (1982). This study integrates Karen Horney's psychoanalytical framework with Richard Sipe's insights on religious celibacy to explore the complexities of human sexuality. It emphasises the adverse effects of enforced sexual abstinence on individual sexual identity, as portrayed in the selected plays. The study also examines the portrayals of sanctuary molestation, the resulting trauma, and the deliberate coping strategies employed by Catholic nuns in the plays as they strive to recover from the trauma of victimization.

Keywords: Catholic nunhood, religious celibacy, sanctuary molestation, coerced sexuality, sexual repression, American theatre

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1. Introduction

Human sexuality is a complex construct shaped by social, cultural, political, and spiritual paradigms, and regulated by the frameworks of heteronormative societies. In *An Interpretation of Desire*, John Gagnon asserts that the formation, sustenance, and modulation of sexual behavior are profoundly influenced by prevailing social structures and cultural dynamics (135–146). While sexual repression affects all aspects of sexuality, its gendered dimensions are evident in the ongoing regulation of female sexuality compared to that of males (Lubertti et al. 1). Female sexual conduct is distinctly marked as more repressed, where women's sexual development is shaped by behavioural norms formulated and regulated by a patriarchal society. Religious celibates are required to consistently suppress their sexual and sensual desires, leading to the repression of their inherent sexual nature. However, the status of female religious celibates is subordinate to men, which runs deep into the history and culture of the Church. The gendered subordination embedded within institutional structures extends beyond the regulation of female sexuality to uphold patriarchal hierarchies, thereby perpetuating systemic gender inequality within religious frameworks. Richard Sipe finds that equality of the sexes can be located in the religious scriptures, but what limits women is 'sex' (*A Secret World* 29). According to him, women cannot have power as power is consolidated in sexual terms (*Sex, Priests and Power* 6). Sipe further argues that a sexually active priest is justified through a gendered lens: when a priest becomes sexually active, his actions are interpreted as affirming his humanity, while simultaneously portraying the woman involved as dangerous, vulnerable, and inherently needy (120). The sexual sins of a priest are often seen as understandable or regrettable lapses, yet they are frequently considered easily forgivable sins (130). Catholic doctrine portrays the ideal woman as silent, sexless, and subservient (*A Secret World* 30), often associating women's existence with sin and lust (50). The traditional view of women as embodiments of sin, together with the institutional emphasis on the desexualization of female religious celibates to preserve religious sanctity, perpetuates systemic subordination. This framework not only represses female sexuality but also reduces their identities to mere representations of chastity and compliance within patriarchal religious structures.

Catholic nuns, through their abstention from sexual desires and thoughts, serve as examples of institutionalised femininity, embodying the standards of ideal female celibacy. Novitiatees commence their journey into nunhood by taking the sacred vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty, thereby embracing a life of discipline and devotion. Jewdokimov and Sadlon posit that within the context of Catholic theology of sexuality, the vow of chastity necessitates the renunciation of sexual activity, portraying celibates as "angelic, sexless, genderless individuals" (2). In the Catholic theological discourse, sexlessness is upheld as an ideal quality for female celibates, reflecting the Church's sexual and celibate culture, which often equates femininity with sinfulness. Sipe contends that the Church's theological framework intertwines sex, pleasure, sin, and women, creating what he describes as the "celibate/sexual system", a structure designed to exert strict control over female sexuality while upholding patriarchal authority (*Sex, Priests,*

and Power 6). This system not only mandates celibacy but also moralizes the denial of sexual desires, ensuring the nuns' complete subjugation to the Church's authority, which perpetuates guilt and spiritual repression; any deviation from the vow of chastity incurs a profound sense of guilt, as it is perceived as both a sin and a betrayal of their religious vocation. The concept of sin is the primal contrivance often employed by the "classic patriarchal" Church to suppress Catholic nuns' intrinsic sexual desires (Ebaugh 401), thus rejecting the possibilities of allonormativity, which upholds the idea that it is normal and natural that individuals experience sexual and romantic attraction (Kennon 2). *The Bible* explicitly condemns any form of sexual intimacy outside of marriage, regarding it as a grave sin and issuing clear warnings against fornication (Tob. 4:12; 1 Cor. 6:18; Gal. 5:19–21; 1 Thess. 4:3–5). According to *The Bible*, the Gospels depict Jesus as single [celibate], anticipating a kingdom of God where people "neither marry nor are given in marriage" but are instead like angels in heaven (Mark 12: 25). Augustine, who established the groundwork for Western Christian theology, posited that the unruly nature of sexual desire constituted a divine punishment for the disobedience of Adam and Eve, advocating for celibacy as the highest expression of human vocation (Carr 6). This notion of celibacy is further supported by St. Paul's exhortation that "those who marry will experience distress in the flesh" (1 Cor. 7:1) and that those who serve God should have an undivided heart.

Convents function on a shared set of beliefs, values, and practices rooted in religious principles—such as the sacraments, *The Bible*, and the lives of the saints—which guide the nuns in leading a life of devotion, service, prayer, and spiritual growth in accordance with the Church's teachings and liturgical practices (T. S. and Jose 293). Central to this pursuit is the vow of celibacy, which enables nuns to renounce sexual transgressions and devote their lives entirely to God, free from the distractions of bodily desires. Nunhood demands nuns embrace an asexual "refrigerator" womanhood, turning off their "sexual drive", detaching themselves from the material world outside (Trzebiatowska 208). Religious celibacy thus enforces a state of asexuality, wherein the nuns are coerced to suppress any forms of sexual desire and freeze their sexual behaviour. In *The Fire in the Ashes* (1995), Joan Chittister discusses the restrictive lives of nuns, asserting that their femaleness must be transcended to become spiritual males, aligning more closely with the "rational" elements of life (148). Chittister posits that,

Asexuality, ironically enough, became the crowning measure of women held in special esteem. At the same time, they were held in special control to maintain this asexuality on the basis of spiritual premises both faulty and destructive women whose sexuality was controlled were especially valuable because they transcended the demands of their sex. (148)

This process of desexualization and the adoption of an asexual identity become defining qualities for nuns, a transformation that is often mandated and expected within their religious roles. The core focus of the present study centres on this enforced expectation for nuns to transcend their sexual nature through coerced asexuality and its possible repercussions. The imposition

of asexuality on Catholic nuns undermines the concept of allonormativity, thereby rejecting the diverse spectrum of sexual identity. Forcing asexuality on female religious celibates may consequently culminate in physical and psychological vulnerability. The present study examines the repercussions of religious celibacy and coerced asexuality on Catholic nuns as depicted in Milan Stitt's *The Runner Stumbles: A Play in Two Acts* (1976) and John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God* (1982). Both *Agnes of God* and *The Runner Stumbles* are inspired by real-life events, exploring controversial and tragic incidents involving Roman Catholic nuns. *Agnes of God* is loosely based on the 1977 case of Sister Maureen Murphy, a 37-year-old Catholic nun from a convent in New York, accused of killing her newborn shortly after childbirth. While the prosecution alleged that Sister Maureen gave birth to a baby boy in her convent room and asphyxiated him, the defence argued that she was emotionally and physically debilitated by the trauma of childbirth and severe blood loss, rendering her incapable of committing the act. Notably, the identity of the baby's father remains undisclosed. Similarly, *The Runner Stumbles* draws from the harrowing story of Sister Mary Janina Mezek, a Polish nun in Isadore, Michigan. Sister Janina was rumoured to have had a romantic relationship with Father Andrew Beinawski. The grim discovery of her remains in a shallow grave near the parish Church followed her sudden disappearance. While Father Beinawski was initially convicted for her murder, subsequent developments revealed that his housekeeper had confessed to brutally attacking Sister Janina with a garden spade and burying her alive. Both plays delve into the complexities of faith, repression, and human frailty within the rigid confines of nunhood.

Catholic nuns hold a prominent space in contemporary American theatre; the portrayal of nuns in popular culture has become a common trope since the late twentieth century; nevertheless, the depiction of the women religious limits itself to the portrayal of either an over-religious nun or a deviant nun. The theatrical manifestation of nunhood in contemporary American theatre is an untouched field of study, and comparatively less research has been done in this area. In "The Waning of the 'Catholic Other' and Catholicism in American Life after 1965", James P. McCartin engages in analyzing *Agnes of God*; according to the author, the play reveals the themes of rape and conspiracy concealed within a convent. Within the narrative, a liberal feminist psychiatrist grapples with the disconcerting realities prevalent in a cloister, wherein elements such as rape, infanticide, conspiracy, and authoritarian oppression contribute significantly to the repressive dynamics of the convent. In John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God*, the mentally disturbed nun (Sister Agnes) transcends conventional limitations and stereotypes associated with avowed women. In "Who is to Shame: Narratives of Neonaticide", Susan Ayres refrains from condemning the depiction of unsettling images such as pregnant or homicidal nuns depicted in the play. Ayres focuses on exploring the complex and contradictory motivations of women who commit neonaticide, examining how these narratives resonate with themes in *Adam Bede*, *Plain Truth*, and *Agnes of God*. This article attempts to shed light on the psychological aspects of concealed pregnancies, challenging societal anxieties surrounding teenage mothers through analysing the character of Sister Agnes. The study not only defends the portrayal of a nun committing infanticide but

also underscores the prevalence of sexual abuse within religious institutions. The relationship between the Catholic Church and theatre is dualistic in nature—the Church employs theatre to propagate its religious ideals and beliefs, while simultaneously it regards theatre with suspicion, viewing it as a potential source of counter-narratives that could challenge or undermine its authority. In “The Church, the ‘Anti-Church’ and Singing, Dancing Nuns”, Kevin J. Wetmore explores the complex relationship between the Catholic Church and the theatre by analysing literary works that engage with both religious and anti-religious perspectives. Delineating the rich presence of women religious in the contemporary American theatre, Wetmore cites plays such as *Agnes of God*, *Doubt: A Parable*, *Late Night Catechism*, and *Nunsense* to bring forth the regressive characteristics of the church. The existing research on *The Runner Stumbles* and *Agnes of God* reveals a significant gap in scholarly exploration of sexual repression and the consequences of coercing asexuality on Catholic nuns.

In *The Runner Stumbles*, a small-town priest named Father Rivard and a young nun named Sister Rita engage in a romantic relationship; exposing the possible consequences of romantic bonds between religious celibates, the play attempts to fortify allonormativity. *Agnes of God* revolves around three intricately drawn female characters—Sister Agnes, Mother Superior, and Dr Martha Livingstone, a psychologist, with a deliberate exclusion of male characters in the play. The portrayal of Sister Agnes as a victim of sexual abuse enables the play to critique societal mechanisms that deflect accountability from the institutional structures facilitating such exploitation, even as it reinforces stereotypes surrounding the perceived sexual vulnerability of nuns. This study focuses on the characters of Sister Rita and Sister Agnes, as both exhibit profound psychological landscapes shaped by sexual repression, contrasting sharply with the male celibates and other characters portrayed in the plays. In *The Runner Stumbles*, Father Rivard, who narrates the story, is characterized as a strong yet occasionally narcissistic figure; he expresses remorse only after Sister Rita’s death. The comparison between the priest and the nun within their romantic relationship underscores a gendered disparity—while the priest garners societal sympathy and forgiveness for his lapse in celibacy, the nun is violently punished and murdered for her deviation from the vow of chastity. In *Agnes of God*, Father Marshall, the sole male celibate figure, appears only in the narratives of the nuns, highlighting his symbolic absence on the stage. This absence serves as a critical commentary on the lesser consequences faced by priests for transgressing celibacy. Furthermore, the narrative hints at attempts by characters to protect the priest who may have fathered Sister Agnes’s baby, further illuminating the unequal moral scrutiny faced by male and female celibates. The present study focuses on Sister Rita and Sister Agnes’ sexual suppression and vulnerability, analysing their portrayal through Richard Sipe’s critical perspectives on religious celibacy and Karen Horney’s theories of neurotic needs. Sipe’s conceptualization of the celibate/sexual system provides a critical framework for understanding the interplay between celibacy and sexual culture within the Catholic Church. He argues that this system is fundamentally dysfunctional, rooted in a flawed understanding of human sexuality. According to Sipe, the sexual behaviour of celibates serves as a symptom of this systemic

dysfunction, ultimately perpetuating the practice of enforced celibacy. In *A Secret World*, Sipe notes that while his study primarily focuses on male celibates, its findings have the potential for “universal” application across gender and cultural contexts (3). The concept of institutionally enforced celibacy forms the foundation of the present study, which examines how such enforced celibacy shapes the experiences of nun characters, ultimately functioning as a repressive mechanism that suppresses and distorts their sexual identities. Horney’s concept of neurotic needs and the dynamics of repression provides a psychoanalytic lens to understand the unresolved inner conflicts experienced by the nuns. The psychological and emotional landscapes of the nun characters, as well as their intricate struggles with institutional and societal expectations, are analysed through this methodological framework. The psychological profiles of the main characters, Sister Agnes, Mother Superior, and Dr Martha Livingstone in *Agnes of God*, and Sister Rita in *The Runner Stumbles*, are constructed using Horney’s theoretical constructs. Sister Agnes and Sister Rita are examined for their neurotic needs and coping mechanisms in response to feelings of inadequacy and repression. Delineating the portrayal of these nun characters in the plays, this study analyses the predicaments of Catholic nuns’ expressing their sexual inhibitions. The abuse Sister Agnes endures at the hands of Father Marshall determines her mindscape, aggravating her aberrant behavioural patterns. The study examines the portrayal of sanctuary molestation and the consequent sanctuary trauma, assessing the methodical strategies and coping mechanisms adopted by the characters (nuns) in the plays to escape from the grievous experience of being a victim.

2. Religious Celibacy/Forced-Asexuality

Extensive research has been conducted on asexuality and asexuality in humans, yet the absence of sexual attraction continues to be the “minimal” definition of asexuality (Bogaert 22). Asexuality refers to a lack of sexual attraction, while celibacy suggests the presence of desire that is deliberately not acted upon (Scherrer 631). Sipe clarifies that one of the most common understandings of celibacy involves abstaining from marriage, though not necessarily from sexual activity itself (*Sex, Priests, and Power* 57). The distinction between marriage and sexual activity, as well as between celibacy (non-marriage) and chastity, generates a considerable degree of ambiguity. This ambiguity allows individuals to assert the rights and privileges associated with celibacy or non-marriage, while simultaneously engaging in a broad spectrum of sexual behaviour (58). Such imprecision blurs the boundaries between religious or moral ideals and personal sexual practices, thereby permitting sexual exploration within the framework of celibate status. Despite these distinctions, asexuality and celibacy are frequently conflated and often perceived as “politically motivated choices”, both serving as frameworks for disciplining the body in specific social and religious contexts (Przybylo and Cooper 307). Since the human body is integrated with irresistible passions, desires, and emotions, celibacy is often employed as a disciplining technique to control the body; “disciplining makes bodies docile ... productive, and also tractable” (Olson 4). Celibacy, according to Richard Sipe, is one’s choice of a “dynamic

state” that can be vowed, involving an honest effort to abstain from “sexual gratification” in order to satisfy one’s “spiritual motive” (Olson 29). Anthony Bogaert, in *Understanding Asexuality*, observes that some people can actively abstain from sex and eschew sex, but they do not necessarily lack sexual attraction (18); Bogaert brings in the example of religious celibates in Roman Catholicism. According to the *Code of Canon Law*,

Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, and are therefore bound to celibacy. Celibacy is a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can more easily remain close to Christ with an undivided heart, and can dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and their neighbor. (277.1)

Religious celibates devote themselves to the holy vow of chastity to attain sublime union with God. As per *The Bible*, an unmarried man is concerned with the affairs of the Lord and how to please Him, while a married man is preoccupied with worldly matters and how to please his wife, resulting in divided interests (1 Cor. 7:32–34). According to the religious codes, chastity is the ideal means to dissociate oneself from worldly desires, formulating one’s body and soul primed for the “intimate connection” (Cheatham 86) with God, offering a “‘higher way’ for salvation” (Holland 66). Such religious obligations, according to Bogaert, can never be upheld forever, and celibates may not necessarily be asexual and may gradually “stray and engage in some form of sexual behaviour because their sexual attraction and inclination are so strong and overwhelm their values” (19). This desexualization, reinforced by religious and moral discourses, compels women to suppress their sexual desires and positions female sexual desires and fantasies as markers of physical and moral vulnerability, driving women to conceal their carnal impulses. In this context, Catholic nuns become potent exemplars of institutionalized womanhood, embodying the archetype of the ideal female celibate. Devoid of any outward signifiers of sexuality and embodying an asexual ideal, they represent the Church’s construct of virtuous femininity, wherein celibacy and the rejection of sexual desire are exalted as the highest manifestations of spiritual purity. The vow of chastity “affords” the Catholic nuns an “asexual” identity that is often perceived as a rejection of female sexual desires (Coburn & Smith 9). The vow of celibacy demands nuns build strong asexual relationships with other members of their congregation, channelling them to find more time and energy to focus on their spirituality. The coercion of a different sexual behaviour can be a challenging and often a traumatic process for nuns as they are obliged to maintain their celibacy for the rest of their lives; their inability to express and explore their true identity results in feelings of guilt, humiliation, perplexity, and desolation.

The obligation to maintain an asexual or aromantic lifestyle can induce considerable emotional distress in celibates, which, according to Karen Horney’s neurotic framework, may result in an increased desire for intimacy (116). Horney’s ideas of neurotic attachment and anxiety provide significant insights for comprehending the psychological dimensions of the nun characters in the plays. Sister Agnes exhibits a profound, unfulfilled longing for emotional connection and

affection, which might have originated from her upbringing with an overprotective mother. Her increased religiosity and fervent yearning for mutual affection from God illustrate this unfulfilled desire. Her fervent rituals signify an unintentional effort to reconcile this emotional emptiness, merging spiritual love with intimate compassion. Her internalised conviction of having violated her vow of chastity, arising from the trauma of sexual abuse, intensifies her psychological distress. This conviction intensifies her worry, establishing a circular cycle in which her piety functions as both an expression of guilt and a means to pursue absolution and affection. Sister Agnes's self-identification as a victim of sexual deviance highlights the profound effects of sexual trauma within the stringent confines of her life, revealing the interplay of affection, anxiety, and religious repression in her character. Sister Agnes's act of neonaticide can be interpreted as a symbolic manifestation of her attempts to escape from the guilt stemming from breaking her vow of chastity; this exemplifies the psychological predicaments she faces as she navigates her own emotional landscape while adhering to religious celibacy. Similarly, Sister Rita's devotion to her religious vocation and her adherence to the vow of chastity are juxtaposed with the emotional intricacies posed by her intimate relationship with Father Rivard. Sister Rita, when examined using Horney's neurotic need models, aligns with the model of affection, wherein the nun craves an intimate relationship with the priest, pursuing emotional closeness that contradicts her religious commitments. According to Horney, even the nonsexual manifestations, such as seeking advice, approval, or support, are expressions of "sexual needs" that have been "sublimated" (115-116). The need for romantic or physical affection can possibly be perceived as a consequence of her internal conflict between her intrinsic desires and her obligations, which compel her to occupy an asexual spectrum. These encounters illustrate the complex dynamics involved in forming intimate connections within a religious community. G. M. Manuel, in "Religious Celibacy from the Celibate's Point of View", observes that intimacy plays a crucial role in the psychosexual development of celibates—the boundaries between ascetic and romantic relationships can become blurred when celibates engage in intimate interactions (292). Cherkasskaya and Rosario propose that women's sexual desire, whether in solitary or partnered contexts, can manifest as sexual affects, thoughts, fantasies, acts, or bodily sensations; these experiences may occur either simultaneously or sequentially (1660-1661). In the context of religious celibacy, it not only abstains female celibates from sexual intercourse but also prohibits any form of "autoeroticism", including "impure thoughts" (Doyle et al. 9). The vow of celibacy necessitates that Catholic nuns cultivate robust asexual relationships with fellow members of their congregation, thereby channelling their efforts towards dedicating additional time and energy to nurturing their spiritual endeavours. Coercing asexual behaviour on an individual who experiences a different sexual orientation can induce psychosexual repercussions in him or her. Practising religious celibacy, for those who are forced to embrace nunhood, becomes an obligatory requirement and an explicit form of coerced sexualisation.

According to Sipe, celibacy is understood as a freely chosen, dynamic state, often formalized through a vow, wherein an individual makes a sincere and ongoing effort to abstain from direct

sexual gratification; this abstinence is pursued with the intention of serving others productively, driven by a spiritual purpose (*Sex, Priests, and Power* 61). However, in the case of Sister Rita and Sister Agnes, their entry into religious life deviates from this idealized framework. Neither Sister Rita nor Sister Agnes joins the convent as a result of a divine calling. Although their decision to enter religious life may superficially appear as a choice, it was, in reality, constrained by a lack of viable alternatives. Orphaned at a young age, the convents served as shelters for them, offering the only semblance of stability and security available. Their limited exposure to the external world further restricted their understanding of opportunities beyond the convent, effectively leaving them with no meaningful choice but to embrace religious life. This absence of genuine agency in their decision underscores a critical divergence from the intended voluntary nature of celibacy. For Sister Rita and Sister Agnes, religious life is less a conscious spiritual commitment and more a circumstantial inevitability shaped by their socio-economic vulnerabilities. This context complicates the notion of celibacy as a freely chosen state by emphasising the nuanced and often coercive conditions under which women may enter religious life. After the demise of their parents, Sister Rita and Sister Agnes are raised in convents, under the care and guidance of Catholic nuns, and are thus influenced by the conventual lives of the nuns. The pervasive influence of their conventual upbringing exerts a significant impact on their cognitive processes, behavioural patterns, and ultimately, their life choices; as a result, both young women find themselves inadvertently drawn into nunhood. Chastity is fundamental to a Catholic nun's vocation; however, for "unwilling nuns", maintaining this vow can become immensely difficult (Abbot 142). This gradual immersion seeds frustration, guilt, and trauma in the nuns, as the incongruity between personal inclinations and the prescribed path of religious celibacy becomes evident. Coercing asexuality on religious celibates becomes a method of constraint imposed by religious authorities to prevent Catholic nuns from experiencing sexual pleasure; deviations from this imposed asexuality often result in expulsion from the convent and public disparagement. Breanne Fahs argues that asexuality reflects "conservative tendencies" to undermine female agency in sexuality, positioning asexual women as "prudish figures" who are excessively moralistic and devoid of sexual desire (458). The spiritual or religious elements align with rational selfhood as regulated by the social institutions such as religion, criticizing and censuring the intrinsic human desire for bodily pleasures. By denying bodily urges, forced asexuality aligns with the belief that true rationality and spiritual purity can only be attained by overcoming the corporeal needs; this traditional notion has historically been used to reinforce gender stereotypes about women's supposed inherent lack of reason. This censure creates a schism between the human mind and the human body, contradicting one's bodily performance with their instinctual thoughts and desires.

In religious traditions, celibacy is used as a technique to regulate the body, which is understood as being governed by uncontrollable passions, desires, and emotions. Within this framework, celibacy functions as a tool to enforce control over natural human impulses, compelling individuals to conform to religious ideals of bodily restraint. Religious celibacy, therefore, imposes

a form of coerced asexuality, even though asexuality is inherently biological and distinct from any external compulsion. The repression of inherent sexual desires poses a formidable challenge, particularly when living in a cloistered community of women who share a similar vocation. The act of suppressing their innate sexual impulses poses significant challenges, even for those who have embraced religious celibacy as their chosen path. Sister Agnes articulates a profound sentiment, stating that love is the second concept she contemplates after God; within the cloistered environment of her religious community, she nurtures an affection for Father Marshall and perceives his reciprocal feelings in the depths of his gaze—"when I look into his eyes I can see" (Pielmeier 16). This poignant expression illustrates the complex emotional terrain traversed by the nun, who choose religious celibacy as part of her vocation. This yearning to be loved aligns with Karen Horney's model of neurotic needs, particularly the need for affection. *The Runner Stumbles* presents a nuanced exploration of the intersection between religious celibacy and human sexuality, offering a compelling context to examine the complexities inherent in such a dichotomy. The emotional and physical intimacy between Sister Rita and Father Rivard, which exists in stark contrast to their commitments to religious vows, compels them to confront their own sexual desires. Sister Rita's existence in a convent perched atop a hill, secluded from the external world, highlights the extensive measures religious authorities take to reinforce the commitment of their members. Father Rivard's counsel to Sister Rita to keep herself busy, eschewing any thoughts of "homesickness" or "melancholy" over their renunciations, is emblematic of the overarching aim to elevate the spiritual above the material (Stitt 11). His belief that religious celibates should remain separate from the world is echoed by Mrs. Shandig, the rectory cook and housekeeper (30). The conventional notion that Catholic nuns are expected to endure a degree of solitude, believed to be the only means by which religious celibates can be "properly tested" and trained to withstand temptations and worldly distractions, paradoxically intensifies the emotional and psychological trauma associated with the suppression of their basic human needs (Abbott 99). Religious celibates may not be able to perform forced asexual behaviour as their innate sexuality cannot be repressed for a long time; asexual relationships may transform into a/romantic relationships due to the intimacy among celibates.

3. Catholic Nunhood and Sexual Vulnerability

The concept of religious celibacy elicits varying responses; some celibates perceive it as empowering and liberating, while others consider it a potential catalyst for feelings of isolation and frustration. Jewdokimov and Sadlon's empirical analysis of sexual intimacies within nunhood reveals that the boundaries of intimacy are crossed "not only by romantic feelings, kisses, tenderness, caresses, flirting, but also hugging, embracing, tempting" (2). They further argue that issues of intimacy, including the vow of chastity, extend beyond direct sexual contact to encompass a broadly defined sphere of eroticism and even everyday interpersonal relations (2). Manuel identifies intimacy as the critical determinant of the psychosexual development of celibates, noting that they have sufficient opportunities for intimate interactions within their

relationships (292). Within the specific context of Sister Rita and Father Rivard, their profound emotional bond becomes palpable through their overt physical expressions, meticulously delineated by Stitt. The nun develops romantic feelings for the priest, desiring his physical presence, indicative of a deep-seated longing for love. At this moment, the nun's sexual impulses become evident in the play; prior to this scene, there are no indications of the nun expressing such desires. This moment, therefore, marks a pivotal realization for her—despite her vocation, she acknowledges her capacity for personal needs and actively seeks to fulfil them. This evolution into a sensual and romantic relationship may be viewed as an expression of a neurotic need for affection, where the yearning for intimacy often takes the shape of sexual infatuation (Horney 115). These expressions encompass intimate acts such as kissing, maintaining close physical proximity, and engaging in embraces—“[T]hey kiss, stand, and embrace” and cannot restrain themselves from sensual pleasure (Stitt 57). These romantic expressions encompass elements of sexual instincts, which Diamond characterizes as “species-typical phenomena” shaped by both social and biological factors (173).

Nunneries are closed communities, having minimal contact with the world outside. The cultivation of a deep inner dissociation from external distractions is essential for the ultimate union with God. Morrison, Johnston and Longhurst, in their research article “Critical Geographies of Love as Spatial, Relational, and Political”, state that love and space are interconnected; according to them, “love, space, and place are mutually constituted” (512). The physical setting in which Sister Rita and Father Rivard reside, the rectory located in the secluded confines of Solon, aptly referred to as the “Land of Rainbows,” is a tranquil and aesthetically pleasing environment, well-suited for seclusion (Stitt 10, 22). This locale, characterized by its serenity, inadvertently creates an environment conducive to the emergence of suppressed romantic desires, thereby catalysing the sexual vulnerability experienced by the nun and the priest. Sexual desire is also seen as a response that is elicited in contexts that are facilitative of sexual desire for that particular woman (Basson 53). The contexts include a woman's situational, relational, and cultural environments, as well as her psychological state, which includes her mental health and the attitudes and frameworks she holds concerning sexuality, gender, and the body (Rosenkratz and Mark 235). The affection and closeness between the priest and the nun, coupled with the privacy and tranquillity of the rectory, influence their libidinal tendencies, triggering their sexual arousal. Similarly, the physical environment and the picturesque wheat field beyond the convent, where Sister Agnes listens to the “songs of seduction”, arouse sensual feelings in her (Pielmeier 74). Sister Agnes remembers the molester as a waxy white flower and also as a bird who opens his wings and lies on top of her, implying the paramount significance and influence that nature and biblical stories of annunciation have on the nun (70, 74). The scenic farmland and the songs from the middle of the field arouse her sensuality; she stands near her window every night for a week and listens to songs anew. Sister Agnes often uses things like wax, flowers, petals, and veins to describe the molester and the process of insemination while opening up to Dr Livingstone, the court-appointed psychiatrist; the signifiers that she refers to are the only

objects that she, as a nun, is familiar with. The fragility of the metaphors employed by the nun indicates her tacit innocence and limited exposure. The nun's comparison of her surroundings to sexual stimuli suggests underlying sexual desires that she associates with the everyday objects she interacts with. This juxtaposition highlights the tension between her austere way of life and the temptations posed by the material world.

Catholic nuns do not possess rights over their sexualities and are restricted from expressing their natural sexuality, leading to heightened emotional and physical susceptibility. As previously discussed, religious celibates may eventually deviate from their vows and engage in sexual behaviour, which can lead to significant psychological consequences. This deviation from their religious vocation and the violation of their vow of chastity often result in feelings of betrayal, trauma, and deep internal conflict. Religious celibates uphold the mandatory abstinence from sex by keeping themselves away from temptations, and the constant fear of their vulnerability towards temptation overpowers them. Father Rivard is attracted to Sister Rita, but he makes a maximal effort to avoid temptation, fearing the consequent expulsion and punishment.

PRIEST. ... Then you came, with your vitality, your joy in the church, and all my enthusiasm returned. But now, people are talking about your moving in here. (*Priest takes Nun's hand.*) It's like a cloud settling on us....

NUN. (*Putting other hand on Priest's which holds her.*) We don't always see it, I know, but God is just.... (*Priest withdraws hand as he realizes what has happened.*)

PRIEST. This, Sister, this now, is exactly why people think nuns and priests should not be alone together.

...

PRIEST. This kind of informal conversation encourages what I feared would—encourages a lack of discipline. (Stitt 30)

Father Rivard experiences profound remorse over his romantic involvement with Sister Rita, whereas the nun gives importance to her emotional experiences and sensual desires, longing for his affection and challenging conventional notions of sin. Holland posits that sexual desire is a “paradigm for the general temptation to sin” and that sexual desire, once initiated, gets quelled only in the act of consummation (71). This resonates with Horney's theory that the neurotic need for emotional connection may show as sexual infatuation or an “indiscriminate” or “insatiable” desire for sexual satisfaction (33, 115). The concept of sin and the consequences of indiscipline persistently disturb Father Rivard; nevertheless, he succumbs to temptation. Cherkasskaya and Rosario posit that female sexual desire has multiple meanings as “to feel attractive, loved, and

desired" (1661); Sister Rita falls in love with the handsome and attractive Father Rivard, and proclaims that she is a "person who is a nun" and hates how the priest addresses her (Stitt 11). She says, "Like I'm a person. I am so weary of hearing Sister's rosary, Sister's book, Sister's this, Sister's that. Never just hers", making herself clear that she yearns to be treated as a woman and not as a mere nun who is devoid of sensual desires (30). According to Sipe, violating religious celibacy extirpates the "core commitment" towards asceticism and invalidates the "trust, respect, support, belief, obedience, and allegiance" that the Catholic nuns willingly exchange for what they perceive as the ultimate sacrifice for the sublime union with Christ ("Celibacy Today" 550). In addition to the trauma of sin and guilt, the fear of judgement and punishment represses sexual desires in Catholic nuns; forced asexuality leads to sexual isolation in them, intensifying the trauma of loneliness and low self-esteem.

Sister Rita repudiates the church's legal system, which is contrived by the clergy. She considers God an ordinary being; "God isn't separate...from the world.... He came to earth as a baby. He worked as a carpenter, drank wine and loved the children. We are like God" (Stitt 30). Sister Rita attempts to convince the priest that a physical union between a nun and a priest will not be judged a sin by God. She exemplifies a feminist theological religious structure that liberates "ecclesial and theological praxis" and calls for a liberated and humanized church, criticizing hierarchical Church structures (Fiorenza 612). Church authorities condemn sex, characterizing it as "dirty, sinful, unclean, and even unnatural", and for those who have never been touched by desire, virginity is their ultimate goal (Doyle et al. 5). Many nuns joined the convents without their conscious will, and exhibited a range of responses, from "meek obedience" to "bitter defiance" (Abbott 133). The deviation from religious celibacy may be viewed as a sort of resistance, wherein the celibates display an inclination towards seeking the pleasure of committing a mortal sin. The plays illustrate that the suppression of sensual impulses can give rise to feelings of abandonment and the reemergence of psychosexual urges that were previously suppressed. The nuns exhibit resentment when confronted with a repressive environment. Sister Rita exhibits a desire for protection and guidance from Father Rivard, a need that ultimately develops into a romantic bond. Sister Rita experiences mounting frustration as the priest continuously dismisses her, and she redirects this frustration into persistent questioning of the priest, reflecting her increasing agitation. Sister Rita, devastated by the avoidance of Father Rivard, bridles and screams at him. The nun, according to Mrs. Shandig, "went all crazy. She threw herself on the ground, crying and sort of rolling back and rolling back and forth" (Stitt 61). Sister Rita becomes frustrated as the priest ignores her; she becomes frustrated by the silence of the priest. Stitt vividly portrays the nun's frustration over the unreciprocated intimacy through detailed descriptions of her gestures—"Nun is frustrated by silence...fights back tears of frustration.... She begins to noisily cut a design in the brown wrapping paper.... Nun, catching a look from the Priest, tries to cut more quietly. Thereby making even more noise" (39). According to Ofra Mayseless, individuals with an avoidant partner tend to have an intense preoccupation with their romantic partners, harbouring a heightened desire for greater intimacy and reciprocity (24). In some cases, these

individuals may display hostility, aggression, or even physical violence; when faced with an objective threat of rejection, abandonment, or loss of control in relationships, this can trigger repressed feelings of anxiety and anger in them (25). Avoidance from the romantic partner, particularly within the context of religious celibacy, has the potential to generate resentment, which could possibly escalate into aggression and violence. Experiencing rejection from a partner can trigger sensual impulses, resulting in feelings of abandonment and the resurfacing of previously repressed psychosexual urges. However, the most perturbing repercussion of sexual repression is their increased susceptibility to sexual coercion and abuse.

4. Agent of God/Sexual Abuser

The history of the church's legal system and case law reveals the existence of unresolved litigation concerning sexual abuse among religious celibates. A significant issue that the Vatican tries to legislate out is the clerics' failure to follow religious celibacy, with transgressions of this vow leading to severe punitive measures for Catholic nuns (Doyle et al. 4). Sexual exploitation within religious institutions has deep and enduring effects on the victims; sexually abused Catholic nuns lose spiritual faith and develop feelings of disillusionment and alienation (Durà-Vilà 23). A vulnerable environment fuels sexual exploitation, particularly within an environment where authority is blindly trusted and obeyed; an environment of respect, trust, and austerity may open doors to sanctuary molestation. Chibnall, Wolf, and Duckro, in "A National Survey of Sexual Trauma Experiences of Catholic Nuns", assess the sanctuary trauma experiences of sexually exploited Catholic nuns in the United States. They observe that nearly one-third of Catholic nuns in the nation have experienced sexual abuse; half of these cases are perpetrated by priests who have been their spiritual directors. According to the study, a priest is likely to be the perpetrator of sex crimes against one in ten Catholic nuns during their religious lives (Chibnall et al. 158). The article details the psychological and spiritual implications that the victims exhibit:

anger, shame or embarrassment, anxiety, confusion, depression, difficulty praying and imagining God as "father," and, in the past, difficulty working, self-blame, disruption of relationship with God, sleep disturbance, and thoughts of leaving religious life. (152)

The sexual exploitation of Catholic nuns occurs within a relationship that invokes an enormous amount of trust and admiration, making the Catholic nuns exceedingly vulnerable. Father Rivard considers it his responsibility to guide Sister Rita spiritually. He says, "[Y]our spiritual guidance, your life in Christ is my responsibility" (Stitt 24). The admiration for priests, who are considered agents of God, makes Catholic nuns susceptible to exploitation. The sexual relationship between the priest and the nun in the play is marked by affection, respect, and fear; the nun considers it an indirect relationship with God. Victims of sexual abuse exhibit emotional trauma and endure spiritual consequences that may disrupt their relationship with God, potentially leading them to consider leaving the religious order (Chibnall et al. 158). Sister Rita and Sister Agnes suffer

from emotional and sanctuary trauma, respectively, both losing faith in the God to whom they are communed. According to the portrayals in the play, the loss of faith precariously evokes in Catholic nuns the thought of betraying their religious vocation, engendering severe repercussions, leading to the loss of faith in themselves.

Maureen Sabine describes a priest as a godly figure who functions as both a protector and a punisher for the abused victim (245). Father Marshall is an “unbalanced and disturbed mix of agape and eros” who seduces Sister Agnes and persuades her for a “selfless sexual surrender”, culminating in “grace and insemination” (245). The victimized nuns lead their lives bearing the psychological and spiritual wounds inflicted upon them by men they have admired and trusted. A Catholic priest is considered to be an agent of God who forgives sins at the confessional, cleansing impure minds. The sacred role of the priest not only solidifies their power within the spiritual hierarchy but also affords them an unsettling degree of control over the vulnerable, exacerbating the psychological consequences of their abuse. Through this dynamic, the abuse of trust and power becomes not only a violation of the body but also a profound spiritual betrayal. Confession makes the Catholic nuns more prone to abuse, as the priests come to know about the anxieties and weaknesses of the victim. Sipe argues that sexuality is often poorly understood among celibates, making them particularly vulnerable to misinterpretations of concepts like the nuptial covenant and Eucharistic nuptial love. This lack of understanding, Sipe observes, is evident in numerous instances where priests, while providing spiritual direction, become sexually involved with their penitents, often justifying these actions as a manifestation of God’s eternal love (*Sex, Priests, and Power* 118). The confessional, traditionally a sacred space for the absolution of sins, becomes an instrument of manipulation, as priests gain intimate knowledge of the nuns’ inner anxieties and weaknesses. This practice renders the nuns particularly vulnerable, as it allows the priests to exploit their confessions for predatory purposes. The molester, to whom Sister Agnes confesses every week, exploits her admiration for songs, using songs as a means to seduce her. Sister Agnes, whose exceptional ability to sing is a key part of her character, finds herself ensnared by this dynamic. Her talent, symbolic of purity and devotion, is twisted into a tool for seduction, as her musical gifts make her more susceptible to the priest’s manipulative advances. Dr Livingstone finds that the molester rendered songs to manipulate and exploit Sister Agnes;

AGNES. And one night I heard the most beautiful voice imaginable.... I saw the moon shining down on Him. For six nights He sang to me. Songs I’d never heard. And on the seventh night. He came to my room and opened his wings and lay on top of me. And all the while he sang.

...

DOCTOR. ... perhaps it was a song of seduction, and the father was ... a field hand.... And the father was ... hope, and love, and desire, and a belief in miracles. (Pielmeier 74–75)

Sister Agnes, characterized by her affinity for music, combined with the entrancing quality of the perpetrator's voice, renders her an easily exploitable target for his advances. McPhillips and McEwan posit that the "unequal power dynamics" can render nuns vulnerable to sexual abuse (14). Sexual coercion occurs when someone in power psychologically manipulates and exploits a vulnerable and dependent person, wielding power over their physical, sexual, or mental weaknesses; priests in both the plays exploit the victims' weaknesses to solicit them. The innocent Sister Agnes gets impregnated by Father Marshall, whom she meets once a week in the confessional room, and is forced to believe that God is the father of her child (Pielmeier 16, 18). The sexual abuse of Sister Agnes is perpetrated by a man in power in an environment that is familiar to her. She believes that bad babies come when a "fallen angel squeezes in down there", and she is ignorant about where good babies come from (19). Catholic nuns, in both the plays, are portrayed as submissive, and their innocence and ignorance are exploited by those in power, instilling guilt and shame in them.

The deranged Sister Agnes is incapable of admitting that she has given birth to a baby, and when hypnotised, she confesses that she is the worst possible kind of person who committed filicide. The ignorance and innocence of Sister Agnes serve as the rationale for concealing not only the sexual abuse perpetrated by the priest but also her pregnancy and the subsequent neonaticide that occurred within the convent. The Mother Superior repudiates the doctor's doubt that some other nun in the convent might have killed the baby to avoid scandal. She says "No one knew about Agnes's pregnancy. No one. Not even Agnes" (22). Sister Agnes, according to the Mother Superior, is mentally ill, temporarily insane, and a very disturbed young woman (27, 59). Sister Agnes is a vacillating female transitioning from puberty to reproductivity, representing the "mysterious possibility of motherhood" (Sabine 235). The ignorance of Mother Superior manifests a discernible lack of cognizance, evident in her belief that Sister Agnes's conception is a miraculous occurrence; this conviction mirrors her belief in Sister Agnes's ability to pierce her hands without a nail, underscoring her theological speculations and sheer ignorance regarding the biological nature of human beings. The fusion of the spiritual and physical realms unveils layers of symbolic significance, elucidating stark disparities between belief systems and empirical knowledge. Sister Agnes serves as a conduit for delineating profound mysteries intertwining femininity, faith, and the potentiality of motherhood. Life within the convent renders a pregnant nun physically and emotionally vulnerable, irrespective of whether the pregnancy results from rape, intimate relationships with priests, or romantic involvement with laymen.

Spiritualizing the sanctuary trauma and considering abuse as an experience that helps develop their spiritual lives are common beliefs among abused Catholic nuns. Durà-Vilà observes that when accepted as a divine/sacred sacrifice, the sanctuary trauma provides Catholic nuns with a powerful spiritual experience, allowing them to feel God's presence and reinforcing their spiritual connection with God. Catholic nuns reframe the abuse into a "religious narrative" to get themselves relieved from the emotional, spiritual, and cognitive distress they have been experiencing; they often engage and identify their experiences with the "pain and desolation"

(Durà-Vilà 26, 40) in the passion of Christ. Catholic nuns who have been abused often feel that the abuse has helped them develop spiritually, believing that the abusers were sent by God to help them grow spiritually. Nuns experience God's presence and a profound affinity to him as they spiritualize their misery and pain and view it as divinely destined, enabling them to find solace in their suffering and experience a deeper appreciation for God's mercy and love. They derive strength and solace from the belief that their suffering constitutes an offering to God, a sacrificial act performed for His glory, with the assurance of divine reward in the form of peace and eternal bliss. This situation can constitute a form of spiritual abuse, as the nuns are unable to speak out about the abuse or seek assistance due to the fear of betraying their faith or God. Sister Agnes, the young novice, has nothing else to identify with but the convent, as she lacks education, a sense of subjectivity, and life experience. She passively submits herself to the priest (an agent of God) and hurts herself physically and mentally, gradually turning out to be masochistic. Sister Agnes considers God as the father of her child and is seen harming herself throughout the play, believing that sacrifice and pain are the only ways to become closer to God. Sister Agnes' comparison of the molester with a waxy white flower implies her interpretation of sexual abuse as a holy intervention. The nun's reminiscence of the molester with open wings brings forward the image of the white liturgical vestment of the orant during holy mass, fortifying her construal of sexual abuse as a holy sacrament. The victim's belief that God is the cause of her pregnancy thus provides a spiritual veil to the rape committed by the priest; a victim considering and believing the rapist as God manifests her trauma as a divine sacrifice. The primary identity of a religious celibate is modelled on Christ as presented in the Gospels. Religious celibates emulate the life of Christ by striving to develop an intimate relationship with God (Eze et. al. 399). The abuse becomes their personal cross, giving the tragic events more significance and purpose, and giving them a sense of hope similar to Christ's resurrection following his crucifixion. Sister Agnes believes that the sexual abuse she endured has had a significant impact on her relationship with God. Sister Agnes considers her abuse a holy union and her conception divine, partly because of her deranged mindscape and partly because of her exposure only to the biblical world. A manifestation of the divine is thought to have occurred during the abuse; when a traumatic event is transformed into a spiritual experience, it turns out to have positive effects, which have the potential to change Catholic nuns' lives and solve their existential problems (Durà-Vilà 40). The "moral" and "spiritual struggles" endured by Catholic nuns may not always cope with the divine narratives of sanctuary trauma (Pargament and Exline 9). The thought of bearing an impure body can cause severe psychotic disturbances in them; the "[a]buse perpetrated by clergy creates particular vulnerability to spiritual struggles" (9). The victims suffer severe trauma when the perpetrators employ the imagery of God solely for their sexual gratification through explicit and implicit silencing strategies. The adherence to vows of obedience and chastity within the Catholic nunhood may have intensified their trauma. While these vows are assumed with the purpose of dedicating oneself as a bride of God, they can inadvertently contribute to instances of sexual abuse and perpetuate enduring patterns of sexual repression throughout one's lifetime.

5. Conclusion

Catholic nuns in the plays encounter the conflict that has plagued women religious throughout history—the dichotomy between the sexual being and the spiritual being. Through the vivid portrayals of Sister Rita and Sister Agnes, it becomes evident that the experience of sexual isolation, oppression, and powerlessness among Catholic nuns leaves them vulnerable to breaking their vows. This susceptibility manifests in numerous instances where Sister Rita and Sister Agnes defy the inherent risks, resulting in occurrences of sanctuary molestation, unwanted pregnancies, and tragic death. The most concerning aspect of sexual repression, as observed in the plays, among female religious celibates, is its potential to heighten Catholic nuns' vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse. In both the plays, the nun characters are depicted often as victims of sexual abuse, as such abuse often takes place within a relationship characterized by admiration, power dynamics, and a significant degree of fear. Sanctuary trauma leads the abused Catholic nuns to lose their sense of self-worth, comfort in their religious lives, and a sense of purpose in their existence. The abuse is deliberately kept a secret owing to threats, making the victimized Catholic nuns feel powerless and guilty. However, they find the abuse more acceptable and less painful when viewed as a spiritual experience that strengthens their religious beliefs. Sister Rita displays symptoms of mental aberration when she is denied sexual intimacy with the priest, whereas Sister Agnes considers sanctuary molestation a divine manifestation, making her insanely spiritual. Through the thespian representations of religious celibacy and Catholic nunhood, both celibacy and nunhood can be perceived as a type of coerced sexual behaviour, specifically asexuality, enforced by the religious authority. In conclusion, both nuns in the plays are profoundly impacted by their sexual relationships, whether coerced or romantic, and consequently endure severe traumatic repercussions.

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