

**Tribhuvan University**

**Conflict Between Individual's Will and Institution's Force: The Cusp of  
Dionysiac Impulse and Apollonian Rationality in Claire Keegan's *Small Things  
Like These***

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in English**

**By**

**Mani Rawal**

**Roll No.: 91**

**T.U. Regd. No.: 6-2-683-128-2012**

**Symbol No: 280843**

**Central Department of English**

**Kirtipur, Kathmandu**

**July 2024**

**Conflict Between Individual's Will and Institution's Force: The Cusp of Dionysiac Impulse and Apollonian Rationality in Claire Keegan's *Small Things***

**Like These**

**Mani Rawal2024**

Tribhuvan University  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Central Department of English

Letter of Recommendation

This research entitled "Conflict Between Individual's Will and Institution's Force: The Cusp of Dionysiac Impulse and Apollonian Rationality in Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*" has been successfully completed under my supervision by Mani Rawal in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English. I would like to recommend this research be examined by an external examiner.

---

Dr. Raj Kishore Singh

Supervisor

## Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "Conflict Between Individual's Will and Institution's Force: The Cusp of Dionysiac Impulse and Apollonian Rationality in Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur by Mani Rawal has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

Members of the Research Committee:

---

Dr. Raj Kishore Singh

Internal (Supervisor)

---

External Examiner

Asst. Prof. Khem Raj Khanal

---

Prof. Dr Jib Lal Sapkota

Head

Central Department of English

Date:.....

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis supervisor Dr. Raj Kishor Singh, Assistant Professor of English at the Central Department of English, for making this work possible. His intellectual guidance, critical comments and genuine suggestions carried me through the entire stages of writing the paper.

I would also like to give my warmest thanks to Prof. Dr. Jib LalSapkota, the Head of the Central Department of English, for approving this thesis paper in its present form. I am grateful to him for his valuable suggestions and guidance.

I would like to convey my special thanks to my teachers and colleagues who motivated and supported me in preparing this thesis.

Finally, I would wholeheartedly thank my parents for letting me through all the difficulties. I experienced their guidance, continuous support, and understanding when undertaking research and writing my project. It is your prayer that sustained me this far.

July 2024

Mani Rawal

Conflict Between Individual's Will and Institution's Force: The Cusp of Dionysiac Impulse  
and Apollonian Rationality in Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*

Abstract

*This paper explores the individual's will and institutional force in Claire Keegan's Small Things Like These in the light of Friedrich Nietzsche's humanistic perspective. The research aims to illuminate the dissimulation of human moral values, investigating the meeting point of Dionysiac Impulse and Apollonian Rationality. For convenience, the study sheds light on the protagonist, Bill Furlong's aspiration for moral action as 'Individual's will' and the act of the convent (Church) and Madam Superior, collectively, would be the vantage point to inspect the 'Institution's Force.' In so doing, the study, equating Furlong and the convent with Dionysiac and Apollonian morale, unravels the power of individual wills in constructing social harmony and perpetuating the moral grammar of human society. The research embodies Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of "individual will to power" and "dissimulation" for theoretical analysis of the primary text. Thus, the research discloses that when individuals absorb themselves in the suffering of others, they attain the highest form of freedom and liberty, which ultimately guides society to a moral destiny—benefiting society with moral dignity and delinking immorality. However, in doing so, the institutional forces are the major hindrances, which with their illusive assertion constantly derail an individual from his moral stand.*

Keywords: Dissimulation, Religion, God, Morality and Ethics

Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2021), the Booker Prize shortlisted

2022, depicts the contestation between the individual's will and the institution's force which resembles the meeting point of two seemingly opposite moral forces, Dionysiac and Apollonian. In doing so, the novella questions the institutional brutality by presenting church and religion as social hindrances to establishing peace and justice and demands individual action by showing the protagonist Bill Furlong as a daring character who rescues the enslaved nunsto separate the social torments. Thus, the novella is a portrayal of social dysfunction because of institutional dominance over folks' welfare and the necessity of individual morality to commute social harmony in the perpetuation of the moral order of society.

*Small Things Like These* unravels the story of Bill Furlong, a seemingly ordinary coal merchant in a small Irish town. Set against the backdrop of a bustling Christmas season in 1985, Bill's life is a quiet routine of deliveries and family obligations. However, a chance discovery during a coal delivery to the local convent throws his world into turmoil. The imposing convent, perched on a hilltop, carries a weight of unspoken secrets. As Bill delivers his load, he stumbles upon a hidden room overflowing with discarded children's shoes. This unsettling revelation ignites a spark of unease within him. The town's tacit acceptance of the convent's harsh treatment of unmarried mothers and their children becomes increasingly unbearable.

The discovery awakens a dormant guilt within Bill—memories of his childhood friend, Laura, surface. Ostracized by the community after becoming pregnant out of wedlock, Laura vanished from his life, leaving him with a nagging sense of helplessness. The image of the discarded shoes becomes intertwined with Laura's fate, fueling Bill's growing anger and desire to act. Fueled by a yearning for redemption and a sliver of hope, Bill embarks on a dangerous mission. He decides to rescue one of the children from the convent's clutches. Bill navigates the constant threat of being exposed by the watchful nuns and the gossip-fueled eyes of the close-knit community.

Keegan masterfully portrays the town's suffocating atmosphere. The influence of the Church is pervasive, casting a long shadow over everyone's lives. People prioritize self-preservation and whisper over confronting the uncomfortable truths hidden within the convent walls. However, Bill's act of defiance, however small, begins to challenge this ingrained silence. His interactions with others offer a glimmer of humanity and potential support. A kind waitress at a local cafe provides a safe space for him to confide his anxieties, offering a rare moment of understanding. A chance encounter with a sympathetic lorry driver hints at the possibility of finding allies in unexpected places. These moments highlight the power of empathy in a world consumed by fear and silence. As Christmas Eve arrives, the tension reaches a fever pitch. Disguised as Santa Claus, Bill ventures into the convent grounds under the cloak of darkness. The search for a child to take with him is fraught with danger. The harsh realities within the convent walls become painfully clear as he navigates the sterile, unfeeling environment.

The novella's ending is deliberately ambiguous. Does Bill succeed in his mission? The answer remains shrouded in mystery, leaving the reader to grapple with the emotional weight of his actions. However, the act of defiance itself becomes a powerful symbol. Bill's courage serves as a catalyst, a small spark that ignites a flicker of hope within the oppressive atmosphere. The novella transcends the story of a single act. It delves deeper, exploring themes of collective guilt, the power of individual courage, and the enduring strength of compassion. Through Bill Furlong's journey, Keegan compels us to question the choices we make and the silences we condone, reminding us that even the smallest act of defiance can have far-reaching consequences.

Because of its layers of unanswered issues, *Small Things Like These*, has garnered critical acclaim for its poignant portrayal of social injustice and individual morality in 1980s Ireland. Gerry O'Hanlon, in this regard, claims, "The issue has particular resonance in an

Ireland where faith formation has suffered from such a dearth of intellectual depth resulting in generations of Irish Catholics without the language and grammar to frame their thoughts and feelings about religion and ill-equipped to face the challenges of secularism” (280). Gerry seems to be aware of the moral questions for any individual beyond the compass of Church authority. Potentially, Gerry hints at the difficulties that an individual has to go through if set apart from the doctrine of the churches. However, the question is that the protagonist not only contrasts his moral ground with the laws of the churches but also shows his guts to rescue the nuns who are tortured by the institutional codes. Thus, indeed Gerry is right in his contextual understanding of the novel but what is left behind is the textual understanding of individual will who could do far better than the institution regarding public welfare.

Comparing Keegan’s novella with James Joyce’s works, Michael K. Freundt opines, “It is also reminiscent of a Joyce story: simple everyday people and their simple everyday lives are explored until something astonishing happens, sometimes only in their minds, and they are changed dramatically. Such is the plot-line of *Small Things Like These*” (4). Indeed, Freundt is right in the sense that the characters in the novel are dominantly involved in the common day experiences. Nevertheless, the significant thing that makes the novel distinct is an uncommon work done by the common character in an uncommon way. The point is that the protagonist not only engages in his responsibility but also in societal duties, however, according to his inner choice. *The Guardian*, similarly, praising the literary work of art describes the novella in the following ways:

It is a sublime, emotive story, the kind you emerge from as if having been away for a very long time: unsure, at first, how to continue with your own life. In many ways, it functions as a midpoint between *Walk the Blue Fields* and *Small Things Like These*, indicative of Keegan’s shift in mood towards a more tender, hopeful kind of fiction.

Unlike her previous parental characters, Bill Furlong is pure of heart, at times exhibiting an almost Dickensian sentimentality. (3)

No doubt Bill is a kind-hearted man, but at the same time, he is also an audacious character who can surpass the bondages set by external agencies. External agencies here I mean the forces beyond his inner choices, which are imposed. It is evident when Eileen says, “You’re just soft-hearted, is all. Give away what change is in your pocket . . .” (45). The line shows not only Furlong’s emotional behavior but also his spirit to do something. In a similar light, Lydia Millet, for instance, Millet asserts: “Curiously, by casting Furlong as a reluctant but good-hearted hero and the women around him as largely enablers and cowards — protective of their own children but otherwise seeing no evil — Keegan almost seems to suggest that in this community it was the women who were most keenly implicated in perpetuating the suffering of their own” (3). Moreover, she adds, “Not only the nuns themselves but the gossips and bystanders and repressed and fearful bourgeois like Eileen, who knew of the crimes and stubbornly turned their faces away” (3).

Beyond the moral question, Erik Hage evaluates the novella from two distinct avenues as he writes, “On the one hand, it has the scathing social and religious indictment of a longer novel; on the other, it is a quiet and morose character study, a novella that delves into one man’s psychology and moral fiber” (1). Hage’s analysis of the novella is more than a review for this research. In fact, his analysis paves the way for further exploration regarding the tripartite relationship between individuals, religions, and society. But as Ron Charles remarks, “Keegan’s Everyman hero is Bill Furlong, whose past and present she sketches with such crisp efficiency that the brush marks of her artistry are almost invisible” (1). Hence, the back-and-fro narrative structure is one of the challenges to exactly trace the location of the major character in association with the social and religious locus. Thus, to observe these

particular issues, the research applies Nietzsche's notion of Dionysiac and Apollonian morale, taking Furlong and religious authority into the line of reference.

Human beings accompany layers of identities within and the situation unfolds those identities in discrete order. In uncovering those faces, humans succeed in proving the essence of human life. For Nietzsche, "The tendency of a person to allow himself to be degraded, robbed, deceived, and exploited might be the diffidence of a God among men" (73). In Nietzsche's claim, he is not merely showing the layers of human characters but also differentiating between humans and gods. In the words of William M. Salter, "Nietzsche uses violent and even virulent language at times about what many regard as religion, but if we have in mind the essential spirit of religion . . . we may call him more a religious than an irreligious man" (106). Nietzsche declaration of the death of god, and in this relevance, his distinction may mislead to misconception regarding his philosophies on Dionysiac and Apollonian morale. However, according to A. C. Grayling, "His announcement in *The Gay Science* that 'God is dead' was not just an aesthetic assertion, but a declaration that everything built on the foundation of theism had collapsed. If the entire culture and civilization founded on Christianity no longer has any basis, then a 'revaluation of all value' is necessary" (317-318). Grayling's analysis allows us to understand Nietzsche as a moralistic philosopher, who is more concerned about human values rather than the existence of god. As Joe Ward remarks, "Nietzsche is not, or at least not always, interested only in the value of rare individuals or small elites but is also preoccupied with broader social units, particularly in relation to the future of humanity" (6). Thus, it further accedes in understanding Nietzsche's discussion of Dionysus and Apollo, Greek Gods, not as gods but rather as the root of moral orders based on human principles.

Nietzsche differentiates between Apollo and Dionysus, at the same time he also shows the forces they generate in the human realm. He describes, "Apollo, the deity of all

plastic forces, is also the soothsaying god. Etymologically the 'shining one', the deity of light, he also holds sway over the beautiful illusion of the inner fantasy world" (16).

Moreover, reflecting upon the relevance of Apollo, he further argues, "The higher truth, the perfection of these states in contrast to imperfectly comprehensible daily reality, the deep awareness of nature healing and helping in sleep and dreams, is at the same time the symbolic analog of soothsaying powers and of art in general, through which life is made both possible and worth living" (16). In his description, he palpably discusses god Apollo befits the ordered, calculative, musing, and pleasant force that eases human life making it understandable. And categorically, he differentiates Dionysus from Apollo instilling: "If we add to this dread this blissful ecstasy which, prompted by the same fragmentation of the *principium individuationis*, rises up from man's innermost core, indeed from nature, we have vouchsafed a glimpse into the nature of the Dionysiac, most immediately understandable to us in the analogy of intoxication" (16-17). Moreover, Nietzsche claims, "Under the influence of the narcotic potion hymned by all primitive men and peoples, or in the powerful approach of spring, joyfully penetrating the whole of nature, those Dionysiac urges are awakened, and they grow more intense, subjectivity becomes a complete forgetting of the self" (17). Thus, for Nietzsche the god Dionysus resonates with humans in utmost spirit to restructure the fundamental errors committed because of illusion and dreams, and it is the state of dissolving self in the crowd of others. This research, therefore, involves Nietzsche's understanding of Dionysiac and Apollonian forces to unearth the implicit distinction between Bill Furlong and religious characters, including church and convent, and unravels the deeper meaning hidden beneath these distinctions. The research fundamentally relies on Nietzsche's opinion because as F. C. Copleston argues, "The philosophy of Nietzsche centers then around this guiding inspiration, the attainment of a truly high culture through the elevation of the type, man" (234). Moreover, since "Nietzsche might value certain kinds of society or culture not for their

own sake but solely because they promote the flourishing of great individuals,” as Joe Ward remarks, “much as he values particular atmospheric conditions and diets” (5). Thus, to validate individual will and investigate the moral principle embedded in the novel, the research has been deliberately endorsed.

Keegan’s protagonist, Bill Furlong, is a disordered character from the very beginning, let’s say since his birth. Disordered here I mean with ruptured origin because “Furlong had come from nothing. Less than nothing, some might say. His mother, at the age of sixteen, had fallen pregnant while working as a domestic for Mrs Wilson, the Protestant widow who lived in the big house a few miles outside of town” (Keegan 5). Moreover, “On the morning Furlong was born, it was Mrs Wilson who had his mother taken into hospital and had them brought home. It was the first of April, 1946, and some said the boy would turn out to be a fool” (5). Furlong does not have moderate economic origin nor he have parental and social significance in his birth. His fractured history reveals his social conditioning and deprived sense of his vulnerable lifelihood because “The main of Furlong’s infancy was spent in a Moses basket in Mrs Wilson’s kitchen and he was then harnessed into the big pram beside the dresser, just out of reach of the long, blue jugs” (5). In fact, “his earliest memories were of serving plates, a black range —hot! hot! — and a shining floor of square tiles made of two colors, on which he crawled and later walked and later still learned resembled a draughts board whose pieces either jumped over others or were taken” (6). These lines expose Furlong’s uncommon way of life and the problems he confronted during his upbringing. What is more crucial at this point is his disoriented life, full of intoxication. He lacked a harmonious and peaceful childhood and social, familial, and individual questions regarding his existence. What is more fascinating is his life is not compounded of Apollonian traits which is “the eternity of beautiful form” (Nietzsche 572). Furlong has become a man surpassing the crucible stages.

Furlong's life is neither a dream nor an illusion; every stage of life is an ordeal that he has to pass, sacrificing the plenitude and solitude of his life. For instance, "As a schoolboy, Furlong had been jeered and called some ugly names" (Keegan 7). His deteriorated past and fractured stages caused him to confront difficulties despite having a "connection with the big house [which] had given him some leeway, and protection" (7). But interestingly, as Nietzsche proclaims, "The greater the advantages in the struggle for the survival, the greater will be the expense of maintenance and protection . . . and the greater will be the risk and the probability of perishing before reaching the summit of life" (413). From Nietzsche's assertion, it is clear that the more one suffers the better glossy one's life would be. In this relevance, Furlong's life, though he is in a cycle of perpetual suffering that never ends, has a certain form of stability in terms of success. Now he has become a coal and timber merchant, and "he lived in the town with his wife, Eileen, and their five daughters" (7), which shows his way of life.

Furlong's life is a common story of an individual; however, he is an individual who is aware of what he is. He knows "it would be the easiest thing in the world to lose everything" (Keegan 12). Moreover, "although he did not venture far, he got around — and many an unfortunate he'd seen around town and out the country" (12). His acknowledgment of the surroundings and his understanding of the mundane world reveals that he is a mature man who is always ready for combat. As Nietzsche suggests, "The mature man is primarily armed with weapons: he is aggressive; he attacks. Implements of war are converted into implements of peace" (411). Although Furlong is not aggressive explicitly, nor does he show battling quality, it does not mean he is a passive character but rather an individual with greater potential. He is such a character because as Nietzsche claims, "Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman — a rope over an abyss" (43). From Nietzsche's perspective, man has both possibilities: either to be an overman or an ultimate man. Thus, Furlong, if

observed his historicity, cannot be an ultimatemanager, who is passive and indulged in the nothingness of human life. He is a progressive, protective character who always thinks for the betterment of his life and family, including others. He is a character with greater strength who has accepted the fractured life and aspires to change the situation with continuous hard work.

More than dissolving self into the regime of god and religiosity, Furlong not only shows his individual will to aspire for social betterment but also implicitly neglects religious and institutional forces. One of the initial rejections he makes of Christian faith is exposed when, during the Christmas Carol Loretta, his daughter, becomes anxious and begins to cry after seeing Santa Clause. Furlong assures his daughter, “There’s no harm . . . Tis just a man like myself, only in costume” (17). Furlong’s inner spirit resonates with the dejection of Christian belief because he implicitly rejects the heroic quality of Santa and compares it with himself. Ritualistically speaking, Santa is a “folk hero” or in the words of John Shlien: “Santa Claus is one of the world’s few complete heroes. He is St. Nicholas, the fourth-century patron saint of children” (389-390). In assuring his daughter, Furlong categorically does two specific things. Firstly, he is defying the pervasiveness of the Christian understanding of Santa Claus as a hero and secondly, he is putting himself in the face of Santa which is to say he is no less than the folk hero Santa. One cannot misread this argument acclaiming groundless because neither Furlong was merely consoling the daughter nor was he unaware of Christian doctrine because “He’d a head for business, was known for getting along, and could relied upon, as he had developed good, Protestant habits; was given to rising early and had no taste for drink” (7). It shows that he was aware of Santa and at the same time he was not solacing his daughter because he could have consoled his daughter by saying any other thing but why did he choose to say the way he said is more pertinent?

Furlong's attitude in association with Santa Claus reveals that he was not a benevolent recipient but a mature man who constantly wills to power, subjugating religious paganism. His observation of Santa and his assumption regarding himself befits him in the category of an individual with a strong will because as Nietzsche advises:

Weakness of will can be a misleading metaphor, for there is no will, consequently there are neither strong nor weak wills. The multiplicity of the impulses and their disarray, the want of system in their relationships with one another, is what results in a 'weak will'; their coordination, under the hegemony of a single impulse, results in a 'strong will': in the first case vacillation and a lack of emphasis, in the second, precision and a clear direction. (36)

Nietzsche's assertion not only distinguishes between strong and weak wills but also categorically objectifies their characteristics, unfolding their origin and possible misunderstanding in case of incapability to unravel the metaphoric reality of the wills. In this connection, Furlong, since he is clear about who he is and more importantly he is aware of his purpose precisely, is expunged of strong will with individual choice. His audacious behavior, rejecting the Christian doctrine and relegating himself as a hero, allows him to be included in the nexus of Dionysiac forces because as Nietzsche defines, "In the Dionysiac dithyramb, man's symbolic faculties are roused to their supreme intensity: a feeling never before experienced is struggling for expression — the destruction of the veil of Maya, oneness as the source of form, of nature itself. The essence of nature was now to find symbolic expression" (21). Thus, From Nietzsche's perspective, Furlong is exposing the symbolic expression and elevating the magnitude of individual wills, while destabilizing Christian conception.

Every step Furlong moves leads to constructive phenomena. Either he tries to furnish his life or he tries to investigate his lost origin, he is never apart from the domain of self-

establishment. In the Dionysian way of understanding the human sphere, “The artistic phenomenon known as life must be understood as the constructive spirit, which constructs under the most unfavorable circumstances in the most gradual way . . . the proof that all the world’s combinations must be given anew is that it is still here, that it has been preserved” (Nietzsche 572). The expectation of a better life depends upon the hardship one confronts and this struggle determines the extremity of one’s inner spirit as well. Furlong, in this relevance, was always in a way to self-engineering. For this, one of the most relevant examples could be his search for his father. Indeed the novel does not provide information about Furlong’s father but does not stop to speculate about it; “Surely some local knew who his father was — everyone had a father — and it didn’t seem likely that someone hadn’t ever said a word about it in his company for people were bound, he knew, to reveal not only themselves but what they knew, in conversation” (Keegan 21). His interest in knowing his father cannot be understood merely as his love for his father but also as a confirmation of his identity and validation of his reality. His quest is also for the meaning of his association and lineage. However, his search becomes daunting when his ultimate hope vanishes when Mrs Wilson encounters a terrible stroke. “When he had gone to see her, on the Sunday, she’d lost the use of her left side and was past speech . . . Like a child she was, sitting up in the bed, gazing out the window, a flowery nightgown buttoned to her chin” (21). The line of the story not only weakens Furlong’s everyday life but also constantly drives him away from where he should have been. The point is that his economic status does not improve nor is he able to unleash about his father. His constant struggle for the betterment of his status and the wish-fulfillment of his family remain unalleviated.

However, Furlong never gives up. Neither he laments nor ever expresses his suffering to anyone. Interestingly, he always thinks of a progressive future and always remains positive. His regular duty: “Getting up in the dark and going to the yard, making the

deliveries, one after another, the whole day long, then coming home in the dark and trying to wash the back off himself and sitting into a dinner at the table and falling asleep before waking in the dark to meet a version of the same thing, yet again” (32), reflects his restless effort to come up with a new version of his life despite confronting the same thing recurrently. Furlong’s tireless endeavor proves his inner will to change the pathetic reality in which he has been submerged for ages. In this context, pertinently, a thought-provoking and intriguing question could be what is obstructing him from achieving his destiny? Why is he not being able to surpass the hindrances? And what ails him to map his new life?

A superficial answer could be his inability to put his effort in the right way or his job does not generate money that could drastically transform his economic reality. However, one should not forget that he is a coal and timber merchant; and importantly, his job has been running smoothly and he is too busy with his work. If so what could be the fundamental problem? Roughly speaking, one of the biggest obstructions is the Church which controls the society in which Furlong and his family reside. In the novella, Keegan portrays the Christian convent in the following ways:

The convent was a powerful-looking place on the hill at the far side of the river with black, wide-open gates and a host of tall, shining windows, facing town. Years round, the front garden was kept in order with shaved lawns, ornamental shrubs growing neatly in rows, the tall hedges cut square. Sometimes, small outdoor fires were made up there whose strange, greenish smoke carried down over the river and across town or away in the direction of Waterford, depending on how the wind was blowing. (37-38)

In the extract, the authority of the convent is conveyed through a series of terminologies like ‘powerful-looking,’ ‘wide-open gates,’ ‘host of tall,’ and ‘shining windows.’ These words and phrases are symbolic articulations of the convent’s distinct features compared to the

town. Moreover, the situatedness of the convent and his observation of 'facing town' hint convent's superior position and town are under constant surveillance. For its purity and unquestionable stature, Keegan informs that "how the birds, for some reason, hadn't touched a single berry on the holly bushes there; the old gardener himself had said so" (38). Indeed, a convent is a sacred place where nuns live with monastic vows and the way it has been described in the novella is quite acceptable; however, later the novella discloses that instead of a holly place, it is a business hub, an institution, that not only collapses its moral ground but also cultivate itself to dictate the town. What is the side business that the convent runs are:

The Good Shephard nuns, in charge of the convent, ran a training school there for girls, providing them with a basic education. They also ran a laundry business. Little was known about the training school, but the laundry had a good reputation:

restaurants and guesthouses, the nursing home and the hospital, and all the priests and well-off households sent their washing there. (38)

In addition to these various businesses, there were other talks in the town that was dark and secret. As the people say, "The training school girls, as they were known, weren't students of anything, but girls of low character who spent their days being reformed, doing penance by washing stains out of the dirty linen, that they worked from dawn til night" (38-39). Some people say those ladies were nuns themselves and others:

the place was no better than a mother-and-baby home where common, unmarried girls went in to be hidden away after they had given birth, saying it was their own people who had put them in there after their illegitimates had been adopted out to rich Americans or sent off to Australia, that the nuns got good money by placing these babies out foreign, that it was an industry they had going. (39)

The opinions of the people vary and it was difficult enough to exactly figure out or extract the truth out of the people's understanding. In fact, "never was there any shortage of idle minds or gossips about town" (40). Whether it be rumors in the town or the reality of the convent, the information is rarely factual. It is a common phenomenon in a society because as Nietzsche suggests, "A society is not a liberty to remain young, and even at the height of its powers a society still produces refuse and waste" (32). Reflecting upon the nature of the society, Nietzsche addresses, "The more bold and energetic its progress, the more prolific it is in failures and defectives — and the nearer its destruction. One cannot ward off decrepitude, or disease, or vice with better institutions; it is folly to think otherwise" (33). From Nietzsche's perspective, a society can never be idle or never be observed from a precise location. It is an amalgamation of multiple thoughts, issues, and stories. Thus, it is foolish to imagine a society in complete wholeness of plenitude. If so, does it mean one should undermine the social way of life? Does it mean society must be freed from any critical observation, judgment, and intervention?

In fact, what Nietzsche is proclaiming is the quality of society and answering what nature of society one should not expect, but not what one should not do for the transmogrification of the society. He confirms that "The advantage consists in the disruption avoided, and the losses arising from them which are saved. Nothing is more costly than a new beginning" (413). Since the social order is intricately related to multiple faculties, it is daunting to be involved in the process of its betterment and it demands lots of effort. However, while discussing the status of the convent and society—town in particular, the locus of my argument is the convent has a certain reality beneath but even the rumors in the town could not question the convent explicitly, which means that the authority of the convent still controls the voice of the people in the society. No matter what people think, the fact is

that nobody dares to interrogate and investigate the institutional force. But astonishingly, how did it succeed in perpetuating its regime of power and control?

The convent gains its power from the moral order of the world. Religious unity and its belief system, which has established its unquestionable regime of truth, make the convent powerful. People surrender in front of the church; all the characters are giving their best to celebrate Christmas in the novella, they are not merely intoxicated by religious doctrine but also have got un-refreshable hangover from the control of the convent. The best school is St. Margaret, where Furlong's daughters study; a convent is a place where people baptize and promise moral responsibility and the convent itself assures for moral security. These moral codes of conduct order itself in the social sphere, by deluding people from the illusive reality of the institution. However, for Nietzsche, moral-world-order means:

That there exists once and for all a will of God as to what man is to do and what he is not to do; that the value of a nation, of an individual is to be measured by how much or how little obedience is accorded the will of God; that the ruling power of the will of God, expressed as punishment and reward according to the degree of obedience, is demonstrated in the destiny of a nation, of an individual. (149)

From Nietzsche's perspective, when there is a moral-world-order or definitively world ordered in a moral sense, God determines the will of an individual. Good and bad, obedience and disobedience are determined in terms of the magnitude an individual adheres to god. Contradictorily, an individual can mark his freedom as being based on the law inscribed by the god. This way of ordering humans is closely associated with the apollonian force, which is according to Nietzsche, "the impulse towards perfect self-sufficiency, towards the typical individual, towards everything which makes a thing strong, clear, unambiguous and typical: freedom under law" (573). The point here is the way of life that the convent or institution

prescribes is a world of morals, which is similar to the Apollonian way of understanding and realizing individuals in an ordered form of expression.

To stick to the Apollonian worldview, in fact, is rather than a prescription, a restriction that not only makes individuals shallow but also dependent. This issue can be associated with the situation of the nuns in the novel who have a secret and dreadful story underneath rather than a sacred history. When Furlong goes to the convent to supply coals, Keegan writes, “He went on with the intention of robbing a freckled pear but soon as his boot touched the grass, a flock of wicked geese ran out after him” (40). As he moved on, “He’d carried on to a small, lighted chapel where he found more than a dozen young women and girls, down on their hands and knees with tins of old-fashioned lavender polish and rags, polishing their hearts out in the circles on the floor” (40). A concerning question is whether nuns with monastic vows should have been in a place where penance is possible; however, they were in such a condition that “As soon as they saw him [Furlong] they looked like they’d been scalded —just over him coming in asking after sister Carmel, and was she about? And not one of them with shoes but going around in black socks and some horrid type of colored shifts” (40-41). Such a horrible situation of the nuns compels us to realize that when people seek to live in order they are disordered by the circumstances and this wholeness not only shatters but also becomes an ammunition to destroy oneself.

Neglecting the possibility of individual prosperity, the institutional conception of human expression compounds their limitation and encourages them to be the slaves of god. To bring it into result, the Apollonian disillusion individuals and derails them from their will to power. In this case, Nietzsche asserts:

The reality displaced by this pitiable lie is: a parasitic kind of human being which prospers only at the expense of every healthy form of life, the priest abuses the name of God: he calls a state of society in which the priest determines the value of

things 'the kingdom of God'; he calls the means by which such a state is achieved or perpetuates 'the will of God'; with cold-blooded cynicism he assesses nations, epochs, individuals according to whether they were conducive to the rule of priests or whether they resist it. (149)

In the institutional force and Apollonian comprehension, the interpreter is benefited, who interprets rather than the god. The illusive representative of the world is further obliqued by the messenger who himself becomes the destroyer of possibilities and an agent, becoming the ruler of the individuals. These happenstances are seriously a consequence of the institutional force and the Apollonian way of understanding morale because since religious authority is supreme in terms of moral viability and moralistic grammar, they dominate the social structure and guide individual choices. Nuns, in this relevance, are indoctrinated by religious authority which has converted them as an object rather than a subject with their individual wills. They were supposed to be in the order of life and with vigorous plenitude.

Nevertheless, when Furlong meets them, one of the nuns says, "Mister, won't you help us . . . Just take me as far as the river. That's all you need to do" (Keegan 41). Nuns' will to leave the convent divulge to observe their suffocation and lack of freedom. Their need for external agencies to attain their desire enables us to think of their distorted life and the fractured reality they have been confronting. They are so de-rooted that their ultimate will is to leave the convent and free themselves from the grip of the convent. Thus they say, "Or you could just let me out at the gate . . . Take me home with you, then. I'll work til I drop for ya, sir" (41). They are even ready to be a Furlong's servant rather than to be a pious nun in the convent. These happenstances suggest that the way institution like convents deludes society and never fail to seize individual rights. Indeed I am not arguing against collective rights nor falsifying the necessity of the convent which aspires to collective progress. I am rather in a similar light to Steven Wall who believes:

collective rights are necessary to further the collective self-rule of groups within modern states . . . in some contexts, the collective self-rule of these groups is necessary to further the individual autonomy of their members. Thus, on the account to be presented here, collective rights can be justified as means to the collective self-rule of the group to which they are given, but this account justifies them only insofar as the collective self-rule of the group furthers the individual autonomy of its members. (235)

Indeed, collective rights aspire for collective betterment which ultimately benefits individual members of the society. But, contrarily, the convent in the novel is not only working against individual autonomy particularly the nun's freedom but also constantly interfering in the town's activities. Even though the convent actively suppresses nuns, it remains in a dominant position to set the morality and ethics of the town. The convent fabricates its outer cover, hiding the cruelty underneath. It is more palpable in the novel when Furlong in the early morning of Christmas Eve encounters the other nun in a horrible condition in the shed of the convent. The moment he confronts the situation, "he wasn't sure that she wasn't the same girl he'd seen in the chapel that day the geese had hissed at him — but this was a different girl. He shone the torch on her feet, saw the long toenails, black from the coal, then switched it off" (Keegan 60). The girl was locked all night in the freezing cold and when Furlong tries to comfort her she feels annoyed by his closeness and does not want to answer about her situation. Importantly, since this girl was different from the other one whom Furlong met earlier, it unearths the reality of the convent that neither the girl's case was exceptional nor few nuns are suffering from the convent's torture. To be more specific, the convent brutalizes many nuns, and these incidents are the continuous actions of the convent which are obliqued and disparately made invisible. The story of this nun is so tragic that when Furlong tries to take her to the convent she says that she has a son who is fourteen weeks old and adds,

“They’ve taken him from me now but they might let me feed him again, if he’s here. I don’t know where he is” (62). In her statement, the girl further reveals that the convent actively participates in individual rights and their affairs. The only means through which the convent could practice such atrocities and hide their reality is they are religiously consolidated. The religious hub and the locus of the moral grammar of the convent are what deteriorate the individual forbearance. As Nietzsche argues, “More recently, man has exercised his capacity for idealization with respect to gods mostly by the increasing moralization of them – but what does that mean? Nothing good, a diminution in man’s strength” (567), the convent’s way of exercising its power is mere idealization rather than elevating social goods.

The convent, as an institution, rather than dignifying what it meant to be, roughly speaking, works as a double-edged sword. It slams the fundamental rights of individuals and cunningly, conceals its brutality with its idealized morality. However, “It is inhuman to bless when one is being cursed” (Nietzsche 96). When the nuns are suffering to their extremity because of the convent’s atrocity, how could it be a base for social justice? This ambivalent nature of the convent is more palpable when Furlong discusses the found girl with Mother Superior. As Furlong enters the room, Mother “went on, closing the door behind her, but hardly had she gone before the young nun came in with a tray. Her hands weren’t steady, and a spoon fell” (64). And when Furlong asks, “Ye must expect a visitor,” she “Looked alarmed.” The unsteady hands of the nun and her alarmed look reveal the terror the nuns in the convent experience. Instead of peace and harmony, the institution threatens the nuns and enslaves them. Moreover, her alarmed look for another visitor also means that the nuns are not supposed to meet the stranger because they could either expose their reality or, to a certain degree, be influenced.

The bondage of the convent and its horrifying atmosphere resembles the Apollonian illusion of life. While demanding ethical promises of the nuns and the slavish attitude they get in return is the Apollonian trait of understanding the human realm. As Nietzsche asserts:

Apollo, as an ethical deity, demands moderation from his followers and, in order to maintain it, self-knowledge. And thus the admonitions ‘Know thyself’ and ‘Nothing to excess!’ coexist with the aesthetic necessity of beauty, while hubris and excess are considered the truly hostile spirits of the non-Apolline realm, and hence qualities of the the pre-Apolline age, the age of titans, and the world beyond the Apolline, the world of barbarians. (26)

What Nietzsche is trying to convey is the Apollonian perspective to observe the non-Apollonian worldview. The ethical dimension of the Apollonian observation is too heavy that they barely see non-Apollonians as humans. This is what happens in the novel when the convent internalizes the conception of its superiority and the people of the town as a benevolent recipient of their preaching. Thus, this absconded face of the convent is what Nietzsche calls dissimulation. In fact, in the name of morality the convent is bestowing a seed of cruelty that germinates immorality instead. As R. Z. Friedman affirms, “It is morality, not theism, which is the keystone of modern culture and politics, Nietzsche believes. And it is this morality which is the central preoccupation of Nietzsche's critique of religion” (294). Thus, from Nietzsche’s perspective “Christianity also stands in opposition to all intellect well-constitutedness — it can use only the morbid mind as the Christian mind, it takes the side of everything idiotic, it proclaims a curse against ‘spirit’, against the superbia of healthy spirit” (181). Nietzsche clarifies that religion, Christianity in particular, endorses a sick mind that is against the powerful will of an individual. In the novel, the terrified nuns and their conditions are transparent example that show how religious ill mind is implicated in the convent and how it stops the will of the individuals. The point is that Apollonian's search

for happiness and a way of life is just like institutional promises that are ambivalent; it shows one but happens the other.

Madam Superior as the authority of the convent should have been in magnified equity and equality; however, she is sick of gender prejudice and stereotypes. When Furlong says he has five daughters, Madam unhesitatingly says, “But it must be disappointing, all the same” (Keegan 66). As Furlong astonishingly asks in what way, she says, “To have no boy to carry on the name” (66). In this context, Madam’s dialogue exposes her mentality and her conventional thoughts regarding gender inequality and the necessity of boys to continue the name of the family. Madam Superior, who is looking after the convent and educating the nuns, has such a conception that seems not only illogical but also full of morbidity which has concealed her intellectual and moral stand. Contrarily, Furlong thinks: “What have I against girls? My own mother was a girl, once. And I dare say the same must be true of you and all belonging to us” (67). Furlong seems to be more liberal and open-minded than Madam. If Madam Superior and Bill Furlong are compared, Madam typically resonates with ambitious and pleasurable destiny, whereas Furlong resembles a man with selflessness who values equally to everyone. For Nietzsche, “Sexuality, ambition, the pleasure derived from illusion and deception, great, joyous gratitude towards life and its typical conditions — that is what is essential to pagan cults and has a good conscience on its side. That which is unnatural . . . combats paganism, as morality, dialectics and asceticism” (572). In this sense, Madam is a pagan, who has forgotten the transformed form of required morality for the real world.

In the tapestry of the convent, the vulnerable nuns are trapped; they are the object of the convent and Madam Superior is the lord of the nuns and the town. If the convent is very cruel to those innocent nuns, what sort of society does it imagine? Will it be a society where justice proliferates? Or it will be a world where humans are deluded by the merciless mercies of religion? Institutions like the convent, I argue, cannot be a means for emancipation as in

the novel. It ever calls for Apollonian morality, which is in itself illusive and merely provides ambivalent reality. If so, what could be the solution to such a humungous problem? For this, the ultimate need is individual will with Dionysiac morale, which not only confirms its destiny but also dissolves itself for the betterment of the rest. For example, Furlong in the novel internalizes the pain of the nuns and tries to help them, forgetting the distance between his and their life. He deliquesces his selfness and is determined to rescue the nuns. When his wife refuses to act upon it because those nuns were not their children, Furlong says, “But what if it was one of ours?” (Keegan 46). It means Furlong does not differentiate between his and the others. In fact, he puts himself in other situations empathetically and blurs the binary. Indeed, he thinks of himself as a whole in totality, without separating any of the entities. This is the role of the individual. In Nietzsche’s words, “The individual is something quite new, and makes something new. The individual is something absolute, and all his actions are entirely his own” (429). The individual with high power generates value. Indeed, every individual will to power but few attain; those breadwinners are not only the overman—who justifies the existence of the human race but also the guide, who directs society to a just order.

Furlong dares to challenge his condition and putting himself at stake determines to rescue the nuns who were suffering from the dogma of the convent. He constantly questions what it is to be human and ever tries to put himself in a position through which he can define humans and humanity in the nexus of religion. Articulating Furlong’s inner questions Keegan writes, “As they carried on along and met more people Furlong did and did not know, he found himself asking was there any point in being alive without helping one another?” (108). Further, Furlong delves into some philosophical questions like, “Was it possible to carry on along through all the years, the decadences, through an entire life, without once being brave enough to go against what was there and yet

call yourself a Christian, and face yourself in the mirror?" (Keegan 108). Furlong's internalization and realization of self in the responsibility of others makes him more human than the convent in general and Madam Superior in particular. As Nietzsche claims, "Every organism reaches as far as its strength permits, subduing the weaker – thus enjoying itself. What makes this tendency increasingly 'human' in character is beginning to feel ever more acutely how difficult it is really to absorb the other" (429), Furlong takes the burdens of the nuns and he is equally absorbed in the nun's suffering which makes him a real human.

More than individualizing self as a separate entity, Furlong liquefies self as "Already he could feel a world of trouble waiting for him behind the next door, but the worst that could have happened was also already behind him; the thing not done, which could have been — which he would have had to live with for the rest of life" (108). Moreover, Furlong realizes, "Whatever suffering he was now to meet was a long way from the girl at his side had already endured, and might yet surpass" (108-109). The sense of acknowledging the trouble of the atmosphere without being shattered by selfhood is what gives the plenitude of individual freedom and "The highest form of individual freedom, of sovereignty, would in all probability be found not five paces from its opposite, that is to say, where the danger of slavery hangs over life, like a hundred swords of Damocles" (Nietzsche 429-430). Thus, From Nietzsche's perspective, the more one dares to uphold the burdens of others the higher is the form of individual freedom, liberty, and autonomy. In this sense, Furlong's attempt to involvement in freeing nuns from the bondage and horror of the convent is a process of attaining individual freedom that ultimately benefits society. What is more crucial in this sense is that institutions like the convent peril society by intoxicating social practices whereas individuals, in the process of liberating themselves, liberate and transform society by dissolving themselves for others.

Comparing the convent and Furlong to Dionysiac and Apollonian morals, “the Dionysiac, as against the Apolline, proves to be the eternal and original artistic force, calling the whole phenomenal world into existence: in the midst of its a new transfiguring illusion is required if the animated world of individuation is to be kept alive” (Nietzsche 117). Dionysiac force is superior which is to say that Furlong is in a better human position and his individual will is more humanistic than the convent and Madam Superior. As Nietzsche demands the illusion of individual betterment, what he means in this case is that institutions like the convent have to transmogrify their moral dignity and their religious behavior in terms of moral grammar hence they can benefit individual, who can shape the figure of an tattered and immoral society.

In conclusion, institutional codes of conduct are hindrances to societal welfare. The more society depends upon the organized set of values, the higher people’s suffering is congealed. Human society, to a large extent, breeds collective forces; nevertheless, as the society depends upon what it constructs, it ultimately, knowingly or unknowingly, serves the purpose of a particular group of people merely, avoiding a large chunk of mass. Thus, it is an individual’s will and aspiration that not only rebukes the collective brutality but also sets a new trail to drive the social journey. Keegan’s *Small Things Like These*, therefore, is a testament that exposes these crucial but harsh realities of society which have to be taken so seriously, that nobody can subdue the fatal consequences, which is approaching.

## Works Cited

Charles, Ron. "'Small Things Like These' Reads Like a Christmas Classic."

*Washington Post*, 8 Dec. 2021.

Retrieved from <[www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/claire-keegan-small-things-like-these/2021/12/07/3509a1be-5762-11ec-929e-95502bf8cdd5\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/claire-keegan-small-things-like-these/2021/12/07/3509a1be-5762-11ec-929e-95502bf8cdd5_story.html)>

Copleston, F. C. "Friedrich Nietzsche." *Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 67, 1942, pp. 231–44.

Retrieved from <*JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3747362>> Accessed 27 May 2024.

Freundt, Michael K. "Small Things Like These by Claire Keegan." *Michael K*

*Freundt*, 23 May 2022.

Retrieved from <[michaelkfreundt.com/2022/05/23/small-things-like-these-by-claire-keegan](http://michaelkfreundt.com/2022/05/23/small-things-like-these-by-claire-keegan)>

Friedman, R. Z. "Masters, Slaves, Heroes, and Saints: Nietzsche and the Critique of

Religion." *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* / : , vol. 47, 1998, pp. 293–308.

Retrieved from <*JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23352662>> Accessed 27 May 2024

Grayling, A. C. *The History of Philosophy: Three Millennia of Thought from the*

*West and Beyond*. Penguin Books, 2020.

Hage, Erik. "Small Things Like These by Claire Keegan." *Harvard Review Online*, 28

June 2022.

Retrieved from <<https://www.harvardreview.org/book-review/small-things-like-these/>>

Hakkıo lu, Mümin, and Mustafa Güne . "Making of Scapegoats: The Complicity of

Church, State and Society in Claire Keegan’s *Small Things Like These*.” *Dil VeEdebiyat Ara tirmalari Dergisi*, Oct. 2023. Retrieved from <<https://doi.org/10.30767/diledeara.1350013>>

Keegan, Claire. *Small Things Like These*. Faber and Faber, 2021.

Millet, Lydia. “The Horrors of Irish Magdalene Laundries, Revisited.” *The New York Times*, 30 Nov. 2021.

Retrieved from <[www.nytimes.com/2021/11/30/books/review/small-things-like-these-claire-keegan.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/30/books/review/small-things-like-these-claire-keegan.html)>

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Helen Zimmern, Fingerprint Classics, 2021.

O’Hanlon, Gerry. “The Future of the Catholic Church in Ireland: Synodality and the Wounds of Abuse.” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 111, no. 443, 2022, pp. 277–85.

Retrieved from <*JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185744>> Accessed 12 May 2024.

—. *On the Genealogy of Morals Ecce Homo*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale, edited by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, 1989.

—. *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of Spirit of Music*. Translated by Shaun Whiteside and Edited by Michael Tanner. Penguin Books, 2003.

—. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, 1974.

—. *The Will to Power*. Translated by R. Kevin Hill and Michael A. Scarpitti, edited by R. Kevin Hill, Penguin Books, 2017.

—. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by R.J .Hollingdale, Penguin Books, 19

—. *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*. Translated by R.J .Hollingdale, PenguinBooks, 2003.

- Reporter, Guardian Staff. “Small Things Like These by Claire Keegan – Between Happiness and Ruin.” *The Guardian*, 28 Oct. 2021. Retrieved from <[www.theguardian.com/books/2021/oct/22/small-things-like-these-by-claire-keegan-between-happiness-and-ruin](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/oct/22/small-things-like-these-by-claire-keegan-between-happiness-and-ruin)>
- Salter, William M. “Nietzsche’s Attitude to Religion.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol.20, no. 4, 1923, pp. 104–06. Retrieved from <JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2939336>> Accessed 27 May 2024
- Shlien, John. “Santa Claus: The Myth in America.” *A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1959, pp. 389–400. Retrieved from <JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42581789>> Accessed 29 May 2024.
- Wall, Steven. “Collective Rights and Individual Autonomy.” *Ethics*, vol. 117, no. 2, 2007, pp. 234–64. Retrieved from <JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1086/511197>> Accessed 29 May 2024.
- Ward, Joe. “Nietzsche’s Value Conflict: Culture, Individual, Synthesis.” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2011, pp. 4–25. Retrieved from <JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jnietstud.41.1.0004>> Accessed 29 May 2024.