

ANGELA'S ASHES: A TRAGI-COMIC CHILDHOOD MEMOIR BY FRANK MCCOURT

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Abstract: The focus of the article is the mixture of tragedy and comedy in Frank McCourt's childhood memoir. It aims at proving that tragic events and humorous ones coexist. Although the novel concentrates on the author's terrible early life in Limerick, it also reveals Frank McCourt's sparkling sense of humour, most of which is illustrated in language.

Keywords: Limerick, Shannon, Catholic Church, consumption, drinking

In an interview with Louise Tucker Frank McCourt confessed that he started writing late in life, soon after retirement. He had been making notes for more than thirty years, but never really sat down to write a book. As a teacher in New York high schools he used to tell his students stories of Ireland and his own childhood. While in the beginning they just wanted to distract him from teaching different subjects in English, the teenagers became interested and asked questions galore. He started writing “Angela's Ashes” in October 1994 and finished it on November 30th 1995. When asked why he had chosen this specific date, he answered that it was Jonathan Swift's birthday, and Swift was one of his idols in literature. That the book was a huge success came as a big surprise for its author. He was repeatedly interviewed, invited to talk about the book on TV. In Limerick he was awarded an honorary degree from the university, the mayor received him, the Irish celebrated “Angela's Ashes”, although there were some negative reviews as well. Regardless of these voices the novelist went back to Limerick again and again, and stated that “I can never get Ireland out of my system.” (Tucker, 2005: PS section, 8)

The second paragraph of “Angela's Ashes” starts like this: “When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all....Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.” (McCourt, 1996: 1) And the whole novel proves to be about dire poverty in Ireland, in a Limerick slum more specifically. It is also about the dampness spread by the Shannon River and the constant rain which was pouring over Limerick and “created a cacophony of hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks.” (McCourt, 1996: 1) It speaks volumes about the Catholic Church as a source of fear, but also about the school system as an instrument of coercion. The story has all the elements of darkness, at times horror. And yet this stunning memoir, while being bleak and heartbreaking, is at the same time surprisingly humorous. This article aims at revealing both the indignity and tragedy of being very poor and the comedy of situation doubled by the spicy colloquial language of the characters.

The tale goes back to the time when Malachy McCourt, Frank's father, met Angela Sheehan in New York where they had immigrated in a desperate attempt to escape serious punishment in Malachy's case, famine and humiliation in Angela's. Malachy had fought in the Old IRA and turned into a fugitive with a price on his head. As a child Frank asked himself “why anyone would give money for a head like that” (McCourt, 1996: 2), given his father's dark complexion, his odd manner, the thinning hair and missing teeth. Frank's father

was born in Toome, County Antrim, that is in the Protestant Northern Ireland. As a little boy he had had an accident, and as a consequence he was never the same. Frank's paternal grandmother revealed the secret: "...as a wee lad your poor father was dropped on his head.....you must remember that people dropped on their heads can be a bit peculiar." (McCourt, 1996: 2) Curiously enough, Angela's baby brother Patrick too fell on his head as his drunk father threw him in the air and failed to catch him back: "Upsy daisy, little Paddy, upsy daisy, up in the air in the dark, so dark, oh, Jasus, you miss the child on the way down and poor little Patrick lands on his head, gurgles a bit, whimpers, goes quiet." (McCourt, 1996: 3) He was crippled and never learned how to read or write, but could count money as no one else, and when a boy of eight started to sell newspapers. All through the book he will be referred to as uncle Paddy who was dropped on the head.

Angela, on the other hand, was pushed by her mother to emigrate: "Why don't you go to America where there's room for all sorts of uselessness." (McCourt, 1996: 5) And she even gave her the fare for the passage. Angela was born on New Year's Eve "with her head in the New Year and her arse in the Old or was it her head in the Old Year and her arse in the New" (McCourt, 1996: 5), and grew up in a Limerick slum where she lived with her mother, two brothers and a sister. She never saw her father, who had run off to Australia before her birth. Angela's Irish family never forgave her for having married a man from the North: "That would teach Mam a lesson for marrying a man from the North with sallow skin, and odd manner and a look of the Presbyterian about him." (McCourt, 1996: 270) Soon after their marriage Francis, a dark boy taking after his father, was born. Then, a year later Frank had a sibling, Malachy, a fair-haired happy child. Even though the young couple could hardly make both ends meet, the family was constantly growing. The twins, Eugene and Oliver, and Margaret were also born in New York. Utter poverty, which had driven them away from Ireland, made life very difficult. Malnutrition and cold were the cause of Margaret's death soon after her birth. Back in Ireland the family suffered another tremendous loss: Eugene and Oliver were the next victims of extreme scarcity of food and minimal comfort. After each loss Angela didn't leave the bed for days on end, turning her back to her husband, her children, the world. Later on, despite squalor and lack of food, Angela gave birth to another two boys, Michael and Alphie.

Besides being from the North Frank's father "got the problem, the Irish thing." (McCourt, 1996: 27), meaning he was a drunkard. The children were fed with bread and tea, the babies with water and sugar, while their father spent his wages- on the rare occasions when he had a job- on alcohol. When he came home to his starving children and wife, he woke them up, forced them to sing patriotic songs and promise to die for Ireland: "Up, boys, up. A nickel for everyone who promises to die for Ireland" (McCourt, 1996: 18) Only he didn't have a nickel left. On Friday nights, when Angela and the children were waiting for him to bring money for food, he failed to come home and drank whiskey and sang Kevin Barry and Roddy McCorley with his pals in the Brooklyn bars. Back in Ireland he sank deeper into alcoholism and even drank the dole money, a sin very few fathers of Limerick committed. As an immediate consequence the McCourt children were permanently tortured by hunger and cold. While in New York the Jewish neighbours took pity on them. After Margaret's death Mrs. Leibowitz brought soup for the children and Angela: "Have soup. Good soup. Make you strong. You boys. Get bowls. I give you soup." (McCourt, 1996: 33). Mr. Dimino, the Italian who owned a grocery shop offered the hungry children food: "Dem twins hungry again? He gives us bits of cheese and ham and bananas..." (McCourt, 1996: 39)

In Limerick the family still didn't have "two pennies to rub together." (McCourt, 1996: 54). In the slums poverty was the norm and most of the men were on the dole, and women begged for charity at St. Vincent de Paul Society or the Redemptorist Church which

grudgingly gave them food vouchers. Crushed by lack of appropriate food and consumption or typhus many died before their time.

Frank McCourt himself fell ill with typhoid fever and almost passed away. Frank's father continued drinking the little money they had. All Angela got on Christmas Eve was a pig's head instead of a goose or ham. Frank, who was carrying it home, became once again the laughing stock of his schoolmates: "Grab him by the ears an' chew the face offa him." (Mccourt, 1996: 106) To make things even worse, the McCourt children had to pick pieces of coal on the Dock Road, so that Angela could boil the pig's head.

In spite of the heavy drinking, of the humiliations and disappointments, and the long walks he took whenever there was a crisis in the family, the children enjoyed their father's company when he told them stories and sang Irish songs. As a small child Frankie shared with his father miraculous stories about Cuchulain, the great Irish hero, the Hound of Ulster, and in Malachy McCourt's opinion "a greater hero than Hercules or Achilles that the Greeks were always bragging about and he could take on King Arthur and all his knights in a fair fight which, you could never get with an Englishman anyway." (Mccourt, 1996: 13) From then on Frank considered the story his very own, and always longed for the early mornings when his dad made tea and fried bread and they had the morning hour for themselves.

Poverty and neglect of the children came to a climax when Angela fell ill with pneumonia, was taken into hospital and Frank, Malachy, Michael, and Alphonse were left to starve and freeze. Driven by despair Frank stole two bottles of lemonade and a loaf of bread in an attempt to save his family. When there was no coal left for the fire, the children went out with the pram- with Alphonse in it- to beg for bits of coal. They were met with menaces, maids chasing them away from the rich people's doorsteps because of the odor of the pram "that smells to the heavens a filthy contraption that you wouldn't use to haul a pig to the slaughterhouse and this is a Catholic country where babies should be cherished and kept alive to hand down the faith from generation to generation." (Mccourt, 1996: 274) Malachy's answer to the maid was to kiss his arse, and the siblings ended up stealing the coal from the people's backyards. Although the situation was desperate, the witty-ironic tone overshadows the dreadfulness of the event.

During the wet and cold season the family lived in a squalid upstairs room, which they called 'Italy' as it was drier than the downstairs one called 'Ireland', and where the walls were soggy and the floor flooded during the rainy season. They all slept in a big bed and covered themselves with old coats. More often than not there was no coal for the fire and the children curled up in the bed freezing and suffering from hunger, too. Even if Frank and Malachy were fourteen and thirteen, they were still wearing short pants patched with rags by their mother. If there was no wool for darning the holes in their stockings, the boys had to blacken their ankles with shoe polish "For the respectability that's in it. It's a terrible thing to walk the world with skin showing through the holes of our stockings." (Mccourt, 1996: 315) The boys' boots were not in a better state, and had to be fixed with pieces of rubber or even cardboard so that they tripped and stumbled and became the laughing stock of their classmates. As the tire pieces were thick and added a few inches to their height, they asked the McCourt siblings: "How's the air up there?" (Mccourt, 1996: 115) And yet, they were lucky to possess a pair of boots. Six or seven of their friends had to go to school barefoot summer or winter. As for their damp dirty shirts they were the only ones they had and good enough for school, church, football, sleep or the cinema.

The "miserable Irish childhood" in the slums of Limerick was made worse by Leamy's National School and the Limerick Catholic priests. Thus, both school and church instilled fear and pain on malnourished, barely clad small children and adolescents alike. At school the masters used leather straps, canes and blackthorn sticks to educate the boys. Paddy Clohessy, a seven year old boy, didn't wear shoes, his mother shaved his head for fear of lice,

his eyes were red, his nose snotty, his kneecaps were covered in scabs, and his clothes were mere rags. Like all boys he hated school and couldn't wait to be fourteen and run away. Schoolmasters flogged boys who asked questions "till the blood spurts". (McCourt, 1996: 132) As if dire poverty and physical correction were not enough, Mr. O'Neill subjected them to psychological pain as well. He would deliberately torture them by slowly peeling a red or green apple in front of the famished boys who couldn't afford an apple. He would then give the peel to the boy who had been a good boy that day, and the privileged child could eat it at his desk, the rest of the class envying him for this stroke of luck: "He looks around the room with the little smile. He teases us, do you think, boys, I should give this to the pigeons on the windowsill?Paddy Clohessy calls out, 'Twill give them the runs, sir, and we'll have it on our heads abroad in the yard.'" (McCourt, 1996: 173) Thus, the boy's humorous answer alleviates the cruel and humiliating gesture of the teacher.

At school the boys were prepared for First Confession, First Communion, and then Confirmation, which would finally make them true believers and soldiers of the Irish Catholic Church. In order for this to come true they had to learn by heart and recite flawlessly in Irish and in English the Ten Commandments, the Seven Virtues, Divine and Moral, the Seven Sacraments, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Hail Mary, the Our Father, the Confiteor, the Apostles' Creed, the Act of Contrition, the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Even if they were making efforts to meet the teachers' expectations the boys were called "a disgrace to Ireland and her long history" and they would "be better off in Africa praying to bush or tree." (McCourt, 1996: 130)

When he was in the sixth class Frank had to write a composition about Our Lord. He entitled it "Jesus and the Weather" and managed to portray Jesus in a comic way. In the child's eyes Jesus would never want to live in Limerick because of the Shannon River and the damp weather, which had killed his brothers. He would live in Israel where it is hot and no one coughed or suffered from consumption. He could eat any time figs and drink a pint: "It's a good thing Jesus decided to be born Jewish in that warm place because if he was born in Limerick, he'd catch the consumption and be dead in a month and there wouldn't be any Catholic church and there wouldn't be any Communion or Confirmation and we wouldn't have to learn the catechism and write compositions about Him." (McCourt, 1996:234)

The only picture the family possessed and which they had brought along from New York was the portrait of Pope Leo the Thirteenth, and Frank's father would never have moved without the Pope. While wanting to hang the picture on the wall he wounded his hand and a drop of blood fell on the Pope's head. In an attempt to wipe the blood away, Angela badly smeared the face of the Pope. Her husband accused her of having entirely ruined the Pope. When she suggested he should hide the destroyed picture in the coal shed, he refused: "Coal hole is no place for a Pope. When the Pope is up, he's up!" (McCourt, 1996: 101) Likewise, every respectable Catholic family had a picture of the 'Sacred Heart of Jesus' hanging on the wall. It was an illustration of Jesus pointing to his chest where there was a big heart with flames coming out of it. When he first saw it, Frank asked why the heart was on fire and why Jesus did not pour water on His heart. The boy's grandmother was appalled by his ignorance, and blamed it on the corrupt American ways. Once again, the reader can't fail to detect the ironically humorous intentions of the author.

Despite the very hard life of the poor people of Limerick, the diseases, the fleas and lice, and premature deaths described in the novel, there is a delightful humorous vein which makes the reading of this childhood memoir highly enjoyable. Much of the wit has its source in language. The inhabitants of the Limerick slums used a colourful colloquial language which enrich the novel. Thus, Frank and Malachy when back in Ireland laughed at the way the Irish were speaking. They laughed at the 'ye's and the 'yeer's the Irish were using all the time. They didn't know what 'boxty' (pancakes) or even 'porridge' meant, which made their

grandmother explode: “ye are the most ignorant bunch of Yanks I ever seen...” (McCourt, 1996: 74) The boys at Leamy’s too were laughing at their way of speaking and asked them: “Are you gangsters or cowboys?” (McCourt, 1996: 83) In the same note, one of the masters at Leamy’s asked: “Are you Yanks or what?”(McCourt, 1996: 83) When the family arrived in Ireland, they were in everyone’s way: “...Jesus, Mary an’ Holy Joseph, look at this house – you an’ Pat an’ Angela and her clatther of Americans.”(McCourt, 1996: 58) In some other situations the language verges on vulgarity, like when Nora Molloy lost her patience with Mr. Quinlivan of the charity society: “Quinlivan can kiss my arse, too, the grinny oul’ bastard...” (McCourt, 1996: 65) Likewise, Pa Keating didn’t hesitate to call his wife, aunt Aggie, “big fat cow”. (McCourt, 1996: 58) Frank, in his turn, was called “a fecking eejit” but also “a great oul’ Yankee” (McCourt, 1996: 134), whereas poor Paddy Clohessy was an ‘omadhaun’ (a fool in Irish) in master O’Dea’s eyes. Frank suffered for a long time from an eye infection and his eyes were often compared with “piss holes in the snow” (McCourt, 1996:301), and because he cried easily his mother used to tell him: “Oh, your bladder is near your eye (McCourt, 1996: 309) Even in the darkest situations Frank McCourt’s language has a special hilarity about it.

When after Frank’s First Communion the family was invited for breakfast at their grandmother’s house, she could not help warning them: “Go aisy with that sugar. Is it a millionaire you think I am? Is it bedecked in glitterin’ jewelry you think I am? Smothered in fancy furs?” (McCourt, 1996: 143) When two men from St. Vincent de Paul Society came to the McCourt home, Frank told them that the parents were upstairs in Italy, because the room downstairs was flooded. After looking around the men were appalled: God Almighty and Mother of God, this is desperate. That’s not Italy they have upstairs, that’s Calcutta.” (McCourt, 1996: 114)

When asked by Louise Tucker how he remembered so many details about his childhood, Frank McCourt retorted that anybody can do that. It is enough to sit in a familiar room or roam the streets of your native town, and the memories will fill your world: “I can walk the streets of Limerick and I can remember things that happened when I was a little fella, delivering telegrams for two years.” (Tucker, 2005: PS section, 4) But the author also mentioned the fact that he did not write about furniture, silk, material things or ordinary happy childhood events. McCourt’s boyhood was one of immense hardship, of intense sadness which conveyed vividness and sharp contour to his stories.

To conclude, what makes “Angela’s Ashes” an outstanding novel is the amazing blend of calamity and joie de vivre. Despite the extremely hard life in the Limerick slums, the grim shortage of food and clothing, the typhoid fever, consumption or all sorts of infections, the deaths of children and young people, Frank McCourt succeeds in filtering all the sad tales through an optimistic lens and imbues his prose with humour and irony.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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