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'Miserable' humour or 'humorous' misery in Frank McCourt's *'Tis*

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Frank McCourt's three-volume memoir is both a heartbreaking and exhilarating tale of childhood, adolescence and maturity. While describing a horrifying childhood in Limerick, Ireland, a confusing, frustrating teenage and early adulthood in New-York, and a challenging, often disappointing teacher's career, the Irish-American writer succeeds in infusing his prose with an exquisite sense of humour, and self-irony. This article aims at pointing out humorous situations and language in McCourt's novel "'Tis", and demonstrating the novelist's mastery in depicting misery, frustration, despair, even death with serenity, and very often benevolent irony and charm.

Key-words: *memoir*, *situational humour*, *Irish, brogue, Paddy-off-the-boat*

1. Introduction

In an interview with Louise Tucker, when asked who or what inspired him to write *'Tis*, Frank McCourt answered that he had been scribbling ever since he was a child. While he went to Leamy's National School in Limerick, a piece of paper and a pen were not available to poor schoolchildren, who were wearing rags and often had to go to school barefoot. Frank even wrote on discarded wallpaper for lack of paper. His obsession with writing and telling stories made the memoir possible. *Angela's Ashes*, his first book, meant a dream fulfilled: he had to get the tale of his miserable childhood out into the world.

'Tis starts with the last word in *Angela's Ashes*, and nineteen-year old Frank McCourt landing in Albany, New-York on board the 'MS Irish Oak' which sailed from Cork in October 1949. Whereas the previous volume unfolds Frank's miserable childhood in a Limerick slum, this second memoir reveals the young man's struggle

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to make the American dream come true, and identify with the American blue-collar society.

This proves to be an impossible mission in the beginning of his new life: "…I'd look at myself in the mirror, pimply face, sore eyes, and bad teeth and know I could never stand up to anyone" (McCourt 2005, 3). In order to survive Frank takes menial jobs, as a lobby houseman and toilet cleaner at the Biltmore Hotel, as a warehouseman or lugging slabs of meat on the docks. During the Chinese-Korean war he is drafted into the US Army and sent to Europe, where he trains a German shepherd dog, becomes a company clerk, and rises to the rank of corporal. Back in New-York, he attends New-York University, despite never having graduated from high school, becomes a teacher, and teaches English and social studies at Mc Kee Vocational Technical School on Staten Island, later at Stuyvesant High School. In 1961 Frank McCourt gets married to Alberta Small, a middle-class American-born girl, who will give birth to their only child, Margaret Ann. Their love story though ends in bitterness and failure. The novel closes with both Angela and Malachy McCourt's deaths and the "sprinkling [of] Angela's ashes over the graves of the Sheehans and Guilfoyles and Griffins while watching the breeze eddying her white dust around the grayness of their old bone bits and across the dark earth itself." (McCourt 2005, 495)

2. Misery and humour

The question arises: how can Frank McCourt's life story be considered as humorous? How insensitive does one have to be in order to laugh at so much grief? At a first glance Frank's struggle to survive in America, the never-ending difficulties and disappointments, the "dark clouds" (McCourt 2005, 105), which frequently assault his head can't possibly be elements of a comic fable. And yet, *'Tis* is undoubtedly a highly entertaining, funny book, even if the facts behind the story are often heart-wrenchingly gloomy. McCourt's openness to all varieties of human emotion and his boundless sense of wonder at the world around him surprise the reader, make him smile or even laugh out loud. The protagonist often leaps out of his own skin and amuses himself while watching his own complicated life. Misery, therefore, is often met with black humour, making it bearable.

Thus, when Frank is on leave in Limerick and a boy who is the spitting image of himself, with scabby eyes, pimples on his face, and closely shaved head calls him Yankee and asks him to turn around so that he can see his "fat arse", he feels like giving him a "good fong in his scrawny arse" (McCourt 2005, 131) and teach him respect for a soldier in the American Army. Nevertheless, he remembers that he

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was just like this poor, dirty, hungry boy and that he would have tormented an American or an Englishman wearing a suit or anyone riding a new bike. He would have thrown a rock through the window of a respectable house and then run away making fun. The humiliating episode does no longer enrage him; he has not forgotten the dark days of his own childhood.

Likewise, when he describes his landlord's wife, Nora Kilkenny, comparing her to "a bag of bones from running the house you could hear her rattle and clank coming up the stairs." (McCourt 2005, 167), the powerful visual image makes the reader forget about Nora's poor health and pitiful appearance.

Similarly, Andy Peters' war 'adventure' retold by Frank, his fellow student at NYU, is comic and grotesque at the same time. While relieving himself in a ditch at the French front Andy is accused by an officer of having abused a French sheep. The soldier tries to make fun of this presumed sinful act, but does not succeed in convincing his superior of the absurdity of the situation, and concludes: "What I got out of it was a dishonourable discharge and when that happens you might as well study philosophy at NYU." (McCourt 2005, 245)

Even when the English literature teacher at the university makes fun of his simplistic way of interpreting "Gulliver's Travels" and he is deeply disappointed with himself, Frank treats this humiliation with bitter humour: "I wonder why I left Limerick at all…I could have read Jonathan Swift to my heart's content not giving a fiddler's fart whether he was a satirist or a seanachie." (McCourt 2005, 197)

3. Situational humour

At a close look the comic tone in *'Tis* can be traced back to either the situation the characters find themselves in or the language they use. While being an American story, the novel is at the same time a tangled web of an Irish immigrant's quests in an attempt to integrate in the new world, become a true American with white teeth and date pretty blonde blue-eyed girls. By highlighting seemingly inconsequential details McCourt succeeds in conveying the story a powerful anecdotal note.

Much of the humour in the novel is self-deprecating. Frank often refers to himself as "Paddy-off-the boat" (McCourt 2005, 28), "Paddy-from-the-bog" (McCourt 2005, 44) or "Scabby Eyes" (McCourt 2005, 131), thus making a laughing stock of himself. The chronic eye-infection causes the young man a lot of trouble. The eye-doctor, who is very irritated by Frank's blinking while he pokes a piece of wood at his eyes, decides that the young man suffers from some kind of infectious dandruff, and sends him to the barber to shave his head. The Italian barber is

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reluctant to do the job and comments: "…if he had a head of hair like that they'd have to cut off his head to get it, that most of these doctors don't know shit from Shinola anyway…" (McCourt 2005, 47). When he leaves the shop: "I feel weak with the shame of it, the bald head, the red eyes, the pimples, the bad teeth, and if anyone looks at me on Lexington Avenue I'll push him into the traffic…" Interestingly, he sees himself from a distance, and makes fun of his own pathetic appearance by using very illustrative language which makes it easy for the reader to picture him: "I can't wander the streets of Manhattan in my bald state for fear people might think they were looking at a snowball on a pair of scrawny shoulders." (McCourt 2005, 53) When he falls in love with Alberta Small, he realizes that she will never accept "a man from a slum who never went to high school and gawks at the world with two eyes like pissholes in the snow." (McCourt 2005, 270)

The Irish addiction to drinking, which was one of the causes of Frank's calamitous childhood and adolescence, is notwithstanding a source of self-irony. Back in Ireland almost every adult man drinks a beer or a whiskey too many. Frank's father himself even drank the dole money, while his wife and children were nearly starving. Mrs. Austin, Frank's first landlady in New-York welcomes him by telling him that all Irishmen do is drink, and that even "cockroaches would starve to death or turn into drunks" (McCourt 2005, 18). Also Frank's aunt's husband, Pa Keating, assures his pals that he would devote himself "to the Virgin Mary if she handed me a lovely creamy black pint of porter" (McCourt 2005, 5). When Frank orders a beer in a New-York Irish bar, the bartender tells him he should spend his time in the library, not in bars "like the rest of our miserable race" (McCourt 2005, 25). He says that Dr. Johnson drank forty cups of tea a day, and throws Frank out of the bar: "Don't come back here till you've read *Lives of the Poets*" (McCourt 2005, 25). And sure enough, he does go to the library and reads *Lives of the Poets* by Dr. Samuel Johnson. Later on, as an inexperienced teacher, exhausted by the fight with reluctant students at Mc Kee Technical School, he joins his fellow teachers at the Meurot Bar for a beer. It turns out that one pint lures another one and yet a few others, and the married teachers "might have to face the wrath of a wife who has cooked a fine Friday fish and now sits in the kitchen watching the grease congeal." (McCourt 2005, 407) For Frank trouble is imminent: he is supposed to have dinner with Alberta at an Arabic restaurant. It is getting very late and he does not even dare call her as he knows that "she'll complain she's been waiting for hours, that I'm just an Irish drunk like my father and she doesn't care if I stay on Staten Island the rest of my life, goodbye." (McCourt 2005, 408)

Although he never forgets or denies his Irish origin, the novelist laughs whole-heartedly at strange, often crooked Irish ways. Even the weather in California as compared to the Limerick cold and dampness becomes a source of

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sparkling humour: Frank’s uncle Keating used to say that if there were a California in Ireland “the whole country would flock there, eat oranges galore and spend the whole day swimming” (McCourt 2005, 54). And yet, part of Frank McCourt will always be and feel Irish, even though he oftentimes ridicules Irish flaws and habits. Moreover, his scathing irony addresses “Returned Yanks” (McCourt 2005, 54) or Irish coming back. He portrays them in an extremely funny and illustrative way: they wear too tight trousers in glaring colours, they show off, and talk through their noses about cars and luxury, and even ask for American drinks. The barman reminds them of “how you went to America with your arse hanging out of your trousers and don’t be putting on airs here, Mick, I knew you when the snot hung from your nose to your kneecaps.” (McCourt 2005, 55)

While being a full-time student at NYU Frank works for a short while at a hat factory and has to dip feathers into different dye pots and attach them to matching hats. In Mr. Meyer’s, the owner of the shop, absence McCourt forgets about neutral and matching colours, and invents new colour schemes, making the Puerto Rican women workers laugh so hard that they can hardly do their work: “I use a feather as a paint brush and on the other feathers I try to make dots, stripes, sunsets, moons waxing and waning, wavy rivers with fish waggling along and birds roosting…” (McCourt 2005, 217). This causes Mr. Meyer to go into a rage and call Frank colour blind: “I guess it’s the Irish thing, no sense of colour, no art, f’ Chrissakes. I mean where are the Irish painters?” (McCourt 2005, 218) and advises him to join the cops or do any other job, wait for the paycheck and have a nice life.

Professors and fellow students at NYU often make Frank look foolish before the class, especially a blonde girl named Mike (Alberta Small) whom he greatly, though silently, admires. His red, infected eyes and his Irish accent constantly give his Irishness away. Consequently, professors ask him scholarly questions about Yeats and Joyce and the Irish Literary Renaissance, but also about the Catholic Church and the priest-ridden and poor country “with a population ready to vanish from the face of the earth due to Puritanical sexual repression, and what do you have to say to that, Mr. McCourt?” (McCourt 2005, 238). And Mr. McCourt does not want to contradict the professor for fear of bad grades and he nods, but remembers what his mother used to tell him: “A nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse” (McCourt 2005, 238). The university teacher does not know this Irish saying, though. In the NYU cafeteria too Frank does not feel at ease when the students talk about the emptiness of life, the absurdity of human existence, about Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. If he had enough time and were not so tired from working in warehouses, on docks and studying at the same time, McCourt would be a champion in moaning and would contemplate suicide. But then, his mother’s words

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would ring in his ears: “Arrah, for God’s sake, don’t you have your health and shoes and a fine head o’ hair and what more do you want?” (McCourt 2005, 276)

In *Angela’s Ashes* the Catholic Church and the Catholic priests inspire respect, awe and fright. The First Confession and the First Communion are depicted as major events in young Irish believers’ lives. In McCourt’s eyes priests have the power to forgive or doom the sinful devotees: “Talking to a priest is like talking to God himself and if you say the wrong thing you’re doomed” (McCourt 2005, 8). During the passage to America on board the ship the nineteen-year-old Frank meets a priest from Los Angeles who takes him under his wing. They travel together from Atlanta to New York and Frank eats a hamburger and a lemon meringue pie for the first time thinking that “if this is the way they eat all the time in America, I won’t be a bit hungry and I’ll be fine and fat, as they say in Limerick.” (McCourt 2005, 12) As Frank has nowhere to go, the priest takes him to the ‘New Yorker’ Hotel where they share the only bed in the room. The boy is shocked to see that the fat priest goes to bed naked, and worse, does not even say a Hail Mary or a prayer before sleep: “I wonder if all priests are like that, naked in bed. It’s hard to fall asleep in a bed with a naked priest snoring beside you” (McCourt 2005, 16). The adventure takes a dangerous turn the next day when the drunken priest almost rapes him and he has to flee, while the little fat naked priest is calling him back, saying that he is sorry. This grotesquely humorous event diminishes Frank’s trust in the Catholic Church and its servants, and he states that he would be the best Catholic in the world if they would do away with priests altogether and he could pray to God in his own bed.

Another time Frank finds himself in a funny situation is when in 1961 he finally gets married to Alberta in the City Hall and then “in some pale imitation of the One, Holy, Roman, Catholic and Apostolic Church” (McCourt 2005, 390), although his future wife is an Episcopalian, a proof that he has not totally lost his faith in the Catholic Church. The ceremony is delayed because of a row between the couple ahead of them. The bridegroom is carrying a green umbrella and does not want to leave it behind for fear it may be stolen. The bride, on the other hand, does not want to get married to a man holding a green umbrella on their wedding day. He refuses to abandon the umbrella and tells her that either she agrees with him keeping the green umbrella or that will be the end of their relationship. The squabble fades away when the bride blackmails him by reminding him of his ex-wife. As a consequence, Frank is asked to hold the umbrella while the couple gets married. During his own wedding ceremony Frank can hardly withhold a fit of laughter being caught “between the lisp [of the official] and the umbrella.” (McCourt 2005, 392) As a result Frank McCourt is the first man ever in New York to be married with a green umbrella dangling from his arm.

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The very first day as a teacher at Mc Kee Vocational School Frank is made fun of by his students because of his Irish accent, his ‘brogue’: “Teacher, you Scotch or something”, (McCourt 2005, 303) they ask him. When he says that he is Irish they comment: “Oh yeah? Irish like to drink, eh? All that whiskey, eh? You gonna be here Paddy’s Day?” (McCourt 2005, 303). Several boys call him Mr. McCoy and throw sandwiches across the classroom, a girl tells him that he is cute, another asks him whether he has a girlfriend and he blushes. In another class there are thirty-five girls who ignore him totally and pluck their eyebrows, apply powder to their cheeks and lipstick on their lips, and file their nails. When he tries to take control and start the lesson, one of the girls tells him that his hair is a mess and that it is obvious that he never had a manicure in his life. Every effort of starting a lesson is met with: “Uh, huh, boring, boring, boring” (McCourt 2005, 306). When the teacher distributes *Vanity Fair* to the class and tries to get them interested in Becky and Amelia, they yawn and complain about the old stuff which will not help them when they have to fix a car or a broken air conditioner, and one of them concludes: “Becky Sharp. Drop Dead” (McCourt 2005, 412). The next book to be studied is *The Scarlet Letter* and McCourt tells them about the New England witch hunts, the accusations and the hangings. The students’ attitude is again one of total dismissal: “Here we go again with the old stuff. We thought you was a nice guy, Mr. McCourt” (McCourt 2005, 413). In search of a compromise the teacher proposes *Five Great Plays of Shakespeare*. The students refuse again to read until one of them calls out: “Shit, man, excuse the language, Mr. McCourt, but here’s this guy saying Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears” (McCourt 2005, 418). Then the girls get interested in Ophelia and her refusal to fight. One girl asks why she did not run away to America. Another voice answers that there was no America in the old days and this causes a verbal dispute: “Whadda you talkin’ about? There was always an America. Where do you think the Indians lived?” (McCourt 2005, 419) The boys want to be Hal, Hotspur, Falstaff whereas the girls protest against the women’s destinies in the plays: “Didn’t Shakespeare like women? Did he have to kill everyone who wore a skirt?” (McCourt 2005, 419) Although he had been warned that the students at vocational schools were real killers and likely to “chew you up and spit you up”, (McCourt 2005, 287) their only object in life being to destroy the teacher and not get any education, Frank is unprepared for the job. Nevertheless, he finds ways to connect to the adolescents and raise their interest in literature.

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4. Language and humour

The other major way in which Frank McCourt creates comic effects is the use of the 'Irish brogue', but also colloquial, colourful, at times indecent language. The linguistic element thus increases the anecdotal, highly oral quality of the novel. Although he was born in New-York, Frank is never considered a true American. Strikingly, his Irish origin is revealed even before he utters a word. While a soldier in Germany, after a fight with a corporal who insolently makes fun of Frank's mother's poverty, he is taken before the captain who tells him: "You've got the map on your face" (McCourt 2005, 112). It happens all the time that whenever he opens his mouth people around him tell Frank that their mothers and fathers and grandparents are Irish. He is surprised to understand that: "You always have to be something else, Irish-American, German-American, and you'd wonder how they'd get along if someone hadn't invented the hyphen" (McCourt 2005, 113). Because of his being Irish-American Frank has difficulties in using proper American-English words like 'flashlight' instead of torch, 'cookie' instead of biscuit, a 'roll' instead of a bun. Likewise, Americans wear 'pants' whereas the Irish wear trousers, and this is how Frank comments on the issue: "When I hear them saying pant leg I feel like breathing faster" (McCourt 2005, 53). Americans have 'elevators' instead of lifts and they go to the 'bathroom', not the lavatory or the WC. In America people 'pass away' or are 'deceased', they do not die. Their 'remains' are taken away in a 'casket' and 'interred', not buried and they rest in 'cemeteries', not graveyards. The word 'cute' confuses Frank, as in Ireland it means cunning, sneaky.

On the other hand, conversation is peppered with Irish words or idioms, which sometimes verge on the indecent, vulgar; nonetheless the effect is greatly amusing. Pa Keating, Frank's uncle, is aware that "these feckin' fags will kill me in the end", but he does not give up smoking and tells Angela: "I won't give a fiddler's fart, Angela" (McCourt 2005, 137). Mr. Calitri, the lecturer in English Composition asks his students to write an essay about a setback, a dark moment in their family. Frank writes about a major disappointment when his mother took Frank and his siblings to the plot where they had planted vegetables, only to find out that it had been looted. Frank is carrying the tools and Angela tells him: "Don't be swinging those tools or I'll give ye a good clitther on the gob." And Frank then 'translates' into American English: "A smack in the mouth" (McCourt 2005, 250). Eddie Lynch, an Irish-American working on the docks makes a hilarious remark about Frank and his pal, Clifford laughing at their being skinny: "Faith and begorrah, I could slip you and Clifford through the awrse of a sparrow, two o' youse" (McCourt 2005, 172). When in a New-York bar, drinking whiskey with an Irish pal, Paddy Arthur, Frank confesses his love for Mike Small, Paddy derides his agony: "He said that's what I

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get for running around with them fookin' Protestants and what would my mother say back in Limerick." Frank does not seem to care about his mother's opinion, and, in exchange, imagines himself lying on a Greenwich Village floor smoking marijuana, listening to Charlie Parker, and drinking wine in the company of a blonde long-haired girl. This causes Paddy's anger: "Arrah, for Jasus' sake, is it coddin' me you are? An old man joins in the conversation and reminds them that they should always "stick with your own" , so that "when a child is born they know who the father is and that…" (McCourt 2005, 273). The scene ends with them singing in a chorus of drunken voices an Irish patriotic song, screaming that they would give their lives for Ireland any time: "Whether on the scaffold high/ Or the battlefield we die/ Oh, what matter when for Erin's sake we fall" (McCourt 2005, 274) and Frank brooding that he is weary of Ireland's suffering and that he cannot live in two countries at the same time. For Angela too it is difficult to adjust to the new life in America, and when she has to drink tea made from teabags, not from loose leaves in a proper teapot, she misses "the peace, ease and comfort" that is in a "decent cup of tea". (McCourt 2005, 378) A real cup of tea back in Ireland is the supreme delight. This is how she expresses the feeling: "Are we put into this world to be busy or to chat over a cup of tea?" (McCourt 2005, 388)

The linguistic map in *'Tis*, a major component of humour, is completed by American colloquial language and specific accents, and narrowing down, the adolescents' way of speaking, including slang, even taboo words.

Soon after his arrival in New-York Frank is surprised by the way a waitress omits the final 'r' in 'war' in 'car' and pronounces 'waw' and 'caw' instead: "I like the lemon meringue pie but I don't like the way Americans leave out the 'r' at the end of a word" (McCourt 2005, 14). Similarly, the waiter at 'Demsey's' pronounces 'fawder', 'gawden', 'New Joisey'.

Paradoxically enough, impolite language used in key situations contributes to the achievement of a comic effect. Hannah, Mrs. Austin's sister, who is married to an Irishman, addresses Frank in a quite unorthodox way: "I don't give a shit about your people… right under your skin you're nothing but shit" (McCourt 2005, 65). In this way she seems to take revenge on her drunken husband. The three of them then get drunk on 'glug', a Swedish alcoholic drink, and they forget about the bad language.

The language used by army superiors when addressing the soldiers is also meant to increase the humorous effect on the readers. Thus, recruits are called "goddam fairies", "a disgrace to Uncle Sam", "lumps of meat for Chinese bayonets". During training at Fort Dix the young men have to put up with the superiors' contemptuous, but at the same time humorous, language: "…goddamit, kills me to call you soldier, goddam pimple on the ass of the army…" (McCourt 2005, 82)

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At Mc Kee Technical High School McCourt tries to be a teacher, but is met with a lot of reluctance from the students to open their textbooks and not interfere with teaching. A boy wants to know if he "gonna be drunk an' 'throwin' up at the parade like all the Irish", some other student explains that Miss Maud, Frank's predecessor, "didn't give a shit" (McCourt 2005, 304) about textbook and she didn't even teach anything.

To conclude, it is amazing how Frank McCourt succeeds in *'Tis* to turn miserable times and heartrending events in the protagonist's life into funny, highly entertaining prose. He masterfully handles situational humour, witty conversation, and hilarious, sometimes indecent language, never omitting any significant detail.

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