AMERICAN DREAM VS AMERICAN ILLUSION

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Abstract:This paper looks at Frank McCourt's novel "Teacher Man" and tries to answer the question whether a poor Irish young man aged nineteen will make the American dream come true. The protagonist's life is marked by ups and downs, by hope and disillusionment, by ecstasy and agony. When everything seems to have gone down the drains, it becomes obvious that Teacher Man has prevailed. He proves to be a 'late bloomer' - in his own words – both as a teacher and a novelist.

Keywords:Irish, teacher man, Limerick, New York, creative writing

When he left Limerick, aged nineteen, bound for New York, Frank McCourt took his young life into his own hands, hoping that the American dream would come true for him. The poor skinny Irish youngster's only fortune was a suitcase, in which he kept his only book, *The Works of William Shakespeare: Gathered into One Volume*, purchased with his last money. The brown suit he was wearing on the voyage came from Nosey Parker's pawnshop, Parnell Street, Limerick and was bargained by his mother, because she couldn't possibly send her son Frank to America, *wearing the relics of oul' decency, this one's shirt, that one's trousers. (p. 34)* His mother also succeeded to buy the suitcase, *that worn-out piece of cardboard held together by a spit and a prayer (p.35),* for much less money than Feathery Burke had hoped to sell it for.

Reflecting on this crucial moment of his life, Frank McCourt realized that but for the book everything about him was secondhand. He even stated that all he had accumulated during his childhood and early youth, Catholicism, Irish history, a tale of suffering and martyrdom told over and over again by priests and teachers, was secondhand.

At twenty-seven years of age the new Irish-American teacher was telling his high school students stories about his miserable childhood in Ireland. He believed that storytelling is teaching and this proved to be true. Students got interested and asked numerous questions about their teacher's life back in Ireland. They found out that he was born in New York and his family sailed back to Ireland when he was four. The family lived in utter poverty after the wild alcoholic father abandoned them, when Frank was ten. A great patriot, ready to die for his native country, he used to wake his children in the dead of night and make them sing Irish patriotic songs. His mother had to beg for food, clothing, and coal to boil water for tea. At school he was mocked at by his mates because of his American accent, and the schoolmaster once compared him to something the cat brought in. The class started laughing and soon he was literally pushed and hit on the nose until he bled. And it was just him against forty cruel boys who grew up on the lanes of Limerick. They called him redskin and gangster and made his life a hell. This is how the small boy of Irish extraction, born in America had to face Irish poverty, his father's addiction and abandonment, his mates' violent behavior.

While telling his students the very sad story of his childhood and the dire poverty his family was living in, the teacher started discovering things which he had not admitted before. He remembered an episode his mother once told him. She was pushing the pram with Frank's brother in it, when a rich lady stepped out of a car and asked her if she didn't want to sell her son Malachy, a boy with golden locks and rosy cheeks. She refused and offered her older son, Frank instead. The lady didn't want him. Frank McCourt's adolescent students were

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outraged: *Aw, gee, Mr. McCourt, your mother shouldn't have done that to you. People shouldn't offer to sell their children. You ain't so ugly. (p. 29)*

Poverty and lack of love and understanding were not the only problems poor Irish children had to fight with. Sadly, they had to cope with a very strict Catholic education and cruel teachers. When Frank was six, he and all his schoolmates were called bad, very bad boys. All they had to do, in his opinion, was *to bow those heads, pound our chests and say, Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. (p.29)* Their darting eyes were proof enough that they were wicked, and that it was the schoolmaster's duty to prepare them for First Confession, First Communion, and then Confirmation. In order to stop being bad boys, they had to be taught Examination of Conscience which meant looking inwards, searching the dark corners of their souls. As a result, they confessed to the teacher and to themselves to all seven deadly sins - Pride, Covetousness, Lust, Anger, Gluttony, Envy, Sloth – but also to have disobeyed the ten Commandments (including adultery and coveting the neighbor's wife). Much later, Frank McCourt understood that this process of Conscience Examination had been deeply engraved in his mind and that he had to live with it: *When you get into the habit of examining your conscience it's hard to stop, especially when you're an Irish Catholic boy. If you do bad things you look into your soul, and there are the sins, festering. (p.31)* A few years later, these Irish scars would be Frank McCourt's only luggage.

Frank left school at fourteen and started doing odd jobs, never ceasing to dream of America. Once he delivered a telegram to the Good Shepherd Convent where nuns and lay women made lace and ran a laundry. The telegram he was delivering required an answer, and while he was waiting for it, he caught a glimpse of the lovely lace a nun was working at: a cherub hovering over a shamrock. When she came back with the answer and Frank plucked up the courage to admire the lace, he was harshly told: *That's right ,boy, and remember this: The hands that fashioned this lace never touched flesh of man. (p195)* If you were Irish and a Catholic nun speaking to an Irish Catholic boy, this was the way you taught him yet another lesson.

When he boarded the ship which would take him across the Atlantic to a land free of Irish and strict Catholic rules, he was still the poor young Frank McCourt, but dreaming of a better life. All he knew was that he *wasn't put on this earth to be a Catholic or Irish or vegetarian or anything. (p.195)* What he didn't know, though, was that he would be followed all his life by his miserable childhood. Soon enough he was telling his high school students *those Irish stories. (p.194)* The American teacher was reliving his Irish childhood.

Once in America, Frank McCourt had to fight for a meager living doing all kinds of menial jobs. The American dream was clearly not waiting for him to come true. Once again he was mocked at because of his Irish accent this time, and his Irish looks. In the eyes of many Americans he was the innocent boy just off the boat, even though he had been in the American Army and had graduated from New York University: *I was disheartened. No room for me in the great American Dream. I returned to the waterfront, where I felt more comfortable. (p.56)* Six years after his passage to America, the young Frank returned to Ireland wearing the American uniform and was met with irony and disrespect. Even though he tried to put on an American accent, his Irishness came to the fore: *Arrah, Jaysus, you're not a Yank at all, at all. You're Irish like everyone else. (p.159)* Sadly, in New York he did not feel at home, the American dream was slowly turning into an illusion, in Ireland he was rebuked for putting on American airs. He was confused. Born in America, brought back to Ireland, he emigrated to America, served in the American Army and found himself between these two worlds in neither of which he felt at home.

Before he became a teacher in New York, he worked on Manhattan, Hoboken and Brooklyn piers hauling, hoisting, pulling and pushing weights which he and his mates had to

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stack on pallets. His life was miserable again, not only because of the very hard physical work but also because of the cruel sarcastic way his fellow workers treated him, the fights that broke out on piers and loading docks. He learned that insulting someone's mother, even if that person didn't like his mother, meant you were in big trouble. In this environment Frank had to fight for survival like the tough guys on the docks: with his fists and hook. And the American dream did not seem to come true for Frank.

The poor boy from Limerick who didn't have a refrigerator or toilet paper at home – as he confessed to his students – didn't believe that he would become a teacher. And there he was in New York City, twenty-seven years old, facing his first class at McKee Vocational and Technical High School in the Borough of Staten Island. The American dream was finally about to come true. Or maybe not quite. When the sixteen year olds swarmed in, he knew that his task was going to be a very difficult, if not an impossible one. The first thing that happened was that one of the boys threw his baloney sandwich at the teacher's feet and he didn't know how to react. Only then did he realize that at the university they had not been taught to be teachers. Gradually, he was to understand that these children were unhappy; they formed gangs and fought other gangs, cursing and injuring one another; Italians, Blacks, Irish, Puerto Ricans would attack with knives, chains, baseball bats in a dangerous world. All this happened while teachers came and went. Some of them were old, others young, some kind, others strict. Students scrutinized them, challenged them. They knew all about tone of voice, body language, weakness or strength. The golden rule the teacher had to learn was that shouting or snapping at them would be the shortest way to losing them. So, the new teacher picked the sandwich from the floor and started eating it and then congratulated the kid's mother for the tasty sandwich. This is how the teacher won the first battle in class. Very soon *Yo, teach* would become *Teacher Man.*

Paradoxically enough, while endeavoring to enact the American dream, Frank McCourt kept going back to his Irish childhood and telling his class sad stories about a world which seemed to resemble their own. The teacher became aware of the fact that each class had a mouth, the student who asked questions and kept him from teaching boring things, along with the complainer, the clown, the goody-goody, the beauty queen, the sissy, the lover, the intellectual, the jerk, the religious fanatic, the melancholy, and not only. There was a lot of unhappiness in these adolescents' lives, and the teacher often identified with them. While the kids enjoyed listening to stories instead of learning about vocabulary and grammar, their teacher was *escaping a cocoon of Irish history and Catholicism, leaving bits of that cocoon everywhere…(p.20)* and all along he was reminded of his Irish accent, his Irish past, his foreignness.

Step by step the Irishman found the way to his students' minds and hearts. The class at McKee made it clear that being another stern scholarly teacher would not be the solution: *Yeah, mister, that's what all the teachers say. Or else. We thought you were gonna be different being Irish an' all. (p.76)* And this teacher proved to be different. Thus, while examining a forged excuse note, he had an epiphany: he asked his students to write excuse notes for their own future children. The class came up with the most original excuses and wrote brilliant assignments about *family problems, boilers exploding, ceilings collapsing, fires sweeping whole blocks, babies and pets pissing on homework, unexpected births, heart attacks, strokes, miscarriages, robberies.(p.85)* As a homework the teenage students had to write *An Excuse Note from Adam to God* or *An Excuse Note from Eve to God.* What he then discovered was American high school writing at its best. Slowly, almost unknowingly Frank McCourt was breaking new ground. He was finding himself, developing his own style and techniques and, above all, he understood that he had to tell the truth. The American dream was going to happen after all.

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At the age of thirty, Frank McCourt married Alberta Small and soon started courses at Brooklyn College for a Master of Arts in English Literature. His thesis, *Oliver St. John Gogarty: A Critical Study,* focused on an Irish personality, doctor, poet, playwright, novelist, athlete, memoirist, a friend of James Joyce. After eleven years in New York he chose an Irish figure and started digging into Irish history and literature thus building his American future on Irish roots. When he was offered a position as an adjunct lecturer at the New York Community College in Brooklyn, it seemed that he was going to embrace an academic career. His students were Hispanic, Black or Irish adults, most of them under thirty, working in stores, factories, offices by day, studying by night. Teaching a course which required research and hard work proved to be a failure and ended in disillusionment a year later. His adult students didn't have any opinions or questions, all they wanted was to graduate. In addition, he had disappointed his wife who considered that he was going nowhere in life, that he was meandering from school to school. The American dream in her eyes was *being happily married, productive, settled, content, having children, developing mature relationships, looking to the future, going on nice vacations, joining clubs, taking up golf, growing old together, visiting relatives, dreaming of grandchildren, supporting their churches, thinking of retirement. (p.121)* Frank McCourt knew that this American dream was not going to come true for him, and that his marriage was on the rocks.

At thirty-eight, a failed teacher of high school English, and at the threshold of a midlife crisis McCourt found himself *adrift in the American dream. (p.157)* In an effort to rise in the world and save his career and his marriage, he took Alberta's advice and enrolled in a doctoral program in Ireland, planning to write a thesis on *Irish-American Literary Relations, 1889-1911.* Here he was again, sailing on board *Queen Elizabeth* to Dublin, more exactly the Protestant Trinity College. The American dream had proved to be a disillusionment but this Irish dream of walking the halls of Trinity College, reading in the college library, and becoming a real scholar could still come true. At McDaid's pub, though, he was met with hostility: *Jaysus, it's a sad fookin' day when you have to come to Dublin for a fookin' university. Don't they have tons of 'em in America, or is it the way they didn't want you and are you a Protestant or what?(p.174)* For the next two years McCourt strove to build and sustain his thesis but finally came to the conclusion that nobody would actually be interested in the topic. Therefore, the failed doctoral candidate returned to New York carrying a bagful of index cards about Irish history and the Irish immigrants in America. Dublin had shut its door to Frank McCourt and his Irish dream had died. The picture of his life was a sad sight: he had emigrated, worked at various dead-end jobs, had got drunk in Germany, chased women, worked his way through New York University, moved from one school to another, got married and failed in marriage, sailed again to Ireland hoping to change his luck and didn't succeed.

Back in New York, *a failed everything (p.178),* he tried to find his place in the world only to be disappointed again and again. Having reached the lowest point in his teaching career, and having lost any hope of making the American dream come true, the now itinerant substitute teacher drifted from one school to another, never feeling at home. Even worse than that, although his wife had given birth to their daughter, Maggie, their marriage came to an end thus annihilating the dream of the American happy family, too.

But then, something happened: the depressed, disappointed teacher came to life again when he was offered a teaching job at Stuyvesant High School, a top high school in the city, and was invited to teach creative writing. Not knowing anything about writing, McCourt remembered his mother saying: *God help us, but sometimes you have to chance your arm. (p. 190)* And that is what he started doing with the demanding adolescents of Stuyvesant High. When introducing Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* and *A Portrait of the*

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Artist as a Young Man by Joyce, his students didn't respond and asked him where his Irish smile had disappeared. But very soon the students were attracted to McCourt's course and flocked to his classes. When the room was literally packed, they sat on the windowsills. All this because Mr. Frank McCourt was a different teacher, a teacher who got their attention, challenged them, one who admitted it when he didn't have an answer. The teacher had finally found his voice and had created his own style of teaching. When the topic was food vocabulary, the students coming from very different backgrounds brought the next day all kinds of foods and all of them had a huge picnic in the park close to their school, and everyone enjoyed Jewish, Chinese, Korean, Italian exquisite dishes. Then they brought cookbooks in class and read out loud their recipes. The teacher had won them over. One student explained……*they look like poetry on the page and some of them read like poetry. I mean they're even better than poetry because you can taste them. And, waw, the Italian recipes are pure music. (p.208)* Soon enough the recipes were chanted and then sung and accompanied by various instruments: a flute, an oboe, four guitars, bongo drums, two harmonicas. Kids in other classes wished they could sing recipes instead of reading Alfred Lord Tennyson or Thomas Carlyle. When teaching poetry Mr. McCourt surprised his students by urging them to find hidden meanings in nursery rhymes or a simple poem like *My Papa's Waltz,* by Theodore Roethke. The kids got the message and played the game. They understood that: *We're not analyzing. We're just responding. (p.222)* And all this because they were lucky enough to be taught by Teacher Man!

When the time came for the bell to ring for the last time for Frank McCourt, he had taught in five different high schools and one college: McKee Vocational and Technical High School, Staten Island; the High School of Fashion Industries in Manhattan; Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, night classes at Washington Irving High School in Manhattan; New York Community College in Brooklyn. He had had classes by day, by night, in summer schools. About twelve thousand boys and girls, men and women, thirty-three thousand classes were taught by him during thirty years. These were good and bad times. Sometimes the teacher grew wings, at other times he questioned his ability to become a good teacher.

Back to the initial question: did Frank McCourt make the American dream happen or was he just chasing a chimera? I think the dream of Teacher Man did come true. It came late, after hard work, disappointments, depression, at times humiliation. It may not be the American dream which is supposed to explode in people's lives and turn the tables. It is a teacher's dream of becoming Teacher Man for so many adolescents. In addition, another dream became reality: Frank McCourt Writer Man. When he said good bye to his last high school class someone called: *Hey, Mr. McCourt, you should write a book. (p.257)* And he DID. *Teacher Man* is the third novel by Frank McCourt.

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