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***Frank Confessions: Performance in  
the Life-Writings of Frank McCourt***

by

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**FRANK CONFESSIONS: PERFORMANCE IN THE LIFE-WRITINGS  
OF FRANK MCCOURT**

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis focuses on the work of Frank McCourt, a writer who came to prominence in the 1990s for writing best-selling memoirs that touched upon a wider set of issues in the contemporary cultural debate: namely Ireland itself, the status of the memoir genre, and Irish-American identity. In five distinct chapters, the thesis adopts a postcolonial perspective using the theories of political performance that have been created by Victor Merriman and Joe Cleary to analyse the impact that McCourt's life-writing and other performances have had upon global impressions of Ireland in the era of the 'Celtic Tiger'. My thesis combines Merriman's premise that in performance we can see the basic idea of Irish culture being resistant to modernism and, therefore, Ireland never properly decolonised with Cleary's notion of disassociation of past and present and his concern with the social and cultural implications of Ireland's uncritical embrace of a form of capitalist modernisation. Cleary and Merriman's key ideas are reshaped to uncover the ways in which McCourt creates a version of 'Irishness' that is replete with recurrent clichés and stereotypical characters. I make the case that the performative model that McCourt adopts exposes his purpose of creating a national and cultural identity of 1930s and 1940s Ireland in which he reworks and revitalises his impoverished, traumatic childhood, revealing that the identity he expresses is a conscious performance. My analysis reveals how McCourt is engaged in a mode of life-writing that follows his journey from boyhood to manhood in a manner that mirrors the parallel process of Ireland's journey into independence and economic prosperity when Ireland and 'Irishness' became desirable commodities. Throughout, I argue that McCourt utilises performance to market Irish identity successfully to a mass readership since his writing reinforces the connection between his life experience and the narrative of the nation. In turn, the thesis uncovers how McCourt appeals to his Irish and American audiences simultaneously by making use of the dual nationality and fluid identity that being Irish-American affords him, whereby he condemns conditions in Éamon de Valera's Ireland at the same time that he exhibits a sense of nostalgia for the past. In McCourt's writing we can recognise many tropes appropriated from films, songs, other memoirs and melodramatic themes, thus providing a meta-textual 'framework' by which McCourt's experiences are organised and given meaning for an audience to understand. As a consequence, each chapter verifies that his deployment of cultural memory and performances of identity function, when 'read', to either deconstruct or cement essentialist notions of nationality or ethnicity.

In the first chapter, '*Angela's Ashes* in Performance', I use Merriman's idea that theatre and society have the potential to interact and become a space of social transformation and utopian thought, to emphasise the overlooked performative dynamic of McCourt's best-known text, the memoir *Angela's Ashes*. The thesis begins from this structuring principle to prove that a reworking of *Angela's Ashes* for performance makes visible the mediation and presentation of 'Irishness' in the re-written text, and how this forges a relation between the past of the narrative and the present of the performance. The first part of this chapter highlights the little-known musical adaptation of *Angela's Ashes* that was staged at Derby Theatre in November 2012. I make the case that this production was strikingly political, and made great efforts to speak to the situation of the Irish diaspora in Derby and to draw attention to the contemporary alienation caused by poverty in that city. The second half of this chapter scrutinises the contrasting example of

Alan Parker's film version of *Angela's Ashes*, which was realised by Paramount Pictures in 1999. I argue that, in contrast with the Derby adaptation, the Parker film evaded any localising particularities that might enable a political critique of any particular nation or governmental regime to be constructed. The chapter shows that a process of construction and mediation is identifiable in the theatre text in order to appeal to particular audiences. Overall, then, McCourt is revealed to be a writer who relied upon the playhouse when creating his own memoirs, and whose writing is itself appropriate for re-adaptation back into the realm of the theatrical. Each of the chapters that follow shows the work of construction and mediation in McCourt own texts, demonstrating how ideas about re-presentation and rewriting inform the thesis.

The second chapter, 'I'd Love To Be Irish When It's Time for a Song', assesses how and why McCourt's work displays an extraordinary strong musical influence and how music intervenes when McCourt uses personal memory to return to past events. I argue that music becomes an index of McCourt's relationship to assorted collectives such as family, community and state, providing him with a means of activating his memory in order to develop the autobiographical nature of the narrative through allusion and reference.

The third chapter, 'Are ye Gangsters or Cowboys? [...] Fred Astaire How Are You?' reveals how McCourt uses 'fantasy' figures from the cinema, particularly the matinee heroes John Wayne, James Cagney and Fred Astaire. The Western hero, the 'hoodlum' and the dancer are shown to provide a cultural framework for McCourt when he comes to describe and explore the vexed issue of Irish-American masculinities.

The two-fold focus of the fourth chapter, 'Melodramatic Moments', argues that McCourt's writing owes a debt to his literary predecessors Dion Boucicault and Seán O'Casey. I make the case that McCourt knew the work of these writers in both textual and performed contexts, and that he relied upon such melodramatic tropes in his own presentation of self, both on the page and in person.

The fifth chapter, 'Frank McCourt's Performance of Irishness: Joycean and Other Legacies' broadens out beyond the four walls of the playhouse to analyse how McCourt may be relying on a set of paradigms from Ireland's best known writer, James Joyce. As I will show, this is not simply a case of McCourt emulating Joyce's own writings – which of course he does – but also a question of how McCourt navigates a set of expectations about how a post-Joycean Irish writer ought to perform.

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## Introduction

Francis (Frank) McCourt (1930-2009) was born in Brooklyn, New York to Irish immigrant parents but was raised in Limerick, Ireland from the age of four. He returned to New York in 1949, so his Irish-American experience is retold from the complex position of returned emigrant and foreign tourist. McCourt taught creative writing to high school students in New York City for thirty years before attracting international public attention by winning the 1997 Pulitzer Prize (and other accolades) for his first memoir *Angela's Ashes*.<sup>1</sup> Alan Murdoch confirmed McCourt's commercial success in *The Independent*, declaring *Angela's Ashes* the 'publishing phenomenon of the decade' after it remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over one hundred weeks.<sup>2</sup> It has since been translated into over twenty-five languages (with the Irish language version being undertaken by Galway-born writer, Padraic Breathneach).<sup>3</sup> Alan Parker's 1999 adapted film gained further popular attention for McCourt's work.<sup>4</sup> McCourt also published the sequel *'Tis* in 1999 to recollect his immigrant life in New York.<sup>5</sup> *Teacher Man* followed in 2005 as a memoir of his teaching career.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the publication of *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt had attempted to develop his profile on New York's cultural and literary scene by acting in 'Irish' plays in New

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<sup>1</sup> Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir Of A Childhood* (London: Harper Collins, 1996). Hereafter cited as *Angela's Ashes* with the page reference placed in parenthesis after the quotation in the main body of each chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Murdoch, 'Dublin, Grasmere, Haworth ... Limerick', in *The Independent*, 12 August 1997 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/dublin-grasmere-haworth--limerick-1245022.html?CMP=ILC->> [accessed 6 July 2010 and 12 December 2011].

Also see *The New York Times* Best Seller's list, 15 December 1996 <<http://www.hawes.com/1996/1996-12-15.pdf>> [accessed 7 July 2010]

<sup>3</sup> See John Rainsford, 'Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* to be translated into Irish by Limerick writers', in *Limerick Leader*, 10 July 2010 <<http://www.limerickleader.ie/news/Frank-McCourt39s-Angela39s-Ashes-to.6406294.jp>>.

Also see <http://www.limerick.ie/visiting/thingstodo/attractions/museums/thefrankmccourtmuseumleamyartgallery/> [accessed 10 July 2010].

Also see, Elaine Ní Bhraonáin, "'Ashes" translation launched in New York', in *The Irish Echo*, 23 November 2011 <<http://irishecho.com/?p=68072>> [accessed 1 December 2011].

Also see, Alan Owens, 'Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* finally gets Irish translation', in *Limerick Leader*, 29 September 2011 <<http://www.limerickleader.ie/lifestyle/entertainment/frank-mccourt-s-angela-s-ashes-finally-gets-irish-translation-1310458>> [accessed 30 December 2012].

<sup>4</sup> *Angela's Ashes*, directed by Alan Parker, produced by Alan Parker, Scott Rudin and David Brown, International distribution by Universal Pictures, (1999). U.S.A. distribution by Paramount Studio, (1999).

<sup>5</sup> McCourt, *'Tis: A Memoir* (London: Harper Collins, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> McCourt, *Teacher Man: A Memoir* (New York: Scribner, 2005).

York. He wrote and performed in *A Couple Of Blaguards*, the prototype for this first memoir, and had articles published in the New York newspaper, *Village Voice* as far back as the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as a teacher of creative writing, McCourt was well aware of effective narrative structures present in the literary dramas and other texts that he taught to students. It is remarkable that there is not a single thesis about Frank McCourt on any of the international databases that list PhD subjects. Furthermore, although he is mentioned in a number of published works, there is, as yet, no published monograph that is solely dedicated to a discussion of his writing. Of course this might have to do with the fact that McCourt's work is, undoubtedly, labelled 'popular' and, consequently, not 'deserving' of 'serious' academic engagement, thereby recycling an old Yeatsian worry about the validity of artwork that has a wide commercial appeal.<sup>8</sup> Of course, this lacuna contrasts remarkably with the sales of more than ten million copies of *Angela's Ashes* alone.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, McCourt's work is much known but little analysed: in that respect this thesis serves as an important corrective to this critical dismissal.

McCourt's detractors dismiss him too glibly and his supporters are apt to appeal to the vague emotional impact of the texts rather than discussing the complex set of diverse materials upon which McCourt has formed his narrative. Nevertheless, their opinions open up a new research question, beyond the scope of this thesis, but which adds to the whole 'popular literature versus Literature' debate. Yet despite – or perhaps because of – this commercial success, a number of critics have expressed reservations about the literary merit of McCourt's writings themselves, thereby adding grist to the

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<sup>7</sup> See for example, Frank McCourt, 'On The Trail of a Jewish Princess', in *Village Voice*, 2 September 1971, pp. 5-7. Also see, McCourt in conversation with Allan Gregg for *TUO Talk Show*, 5 January 1997 <<http://allangregg.tv.org/episode/121820/frank-mccourt>> [accessed 22 February 2013]. According to Gregg, McCourt developed a 'significant network' of writers from among the 'literati and intelligentsia' of 'The Lion's Head' before the publication of *Angela's Ashes*.

<sup>8</sup> For an insight into this Yeatsian worry see Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> See Carlo Gébler, 'Author whose first and best-known book was his extraordinary memoir *Angela's Ashes*', in *The Guardian*, 20 July 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jul/20/frank-mccourt-obituary>> [accessed 5 January 2014].



aforementioned old Yeatsian anxiety.<sup>10</sup> Some historically-minded critics have attacked McCourt's writing as being empirically untruthful. McCourt himself commented on this reaction when *Angela's Ashes* was published in Ireland: 'I was denounced from hill, pulpit and barstool. Certain citizens claimed I had disgraced the fair name of the city of Limerick, that I had attacked the Church, that I had despoiled my mother's name and that if I returned to Limerick, I would surely be found hanging from a lamppost.'<sup>11</sup> The less familiar Limerick author and playwright Críostóir Ó Floinn judges *Angela's Ashes* as a 'most nauseating, [...] commercial and repulsive, [...] meretricious concoction [...] awash with contrived pathos and sentiment', rather than being a 'literary work of integrity.'<sup>12</sup> Ó Floinn defines McCourt as 'a Yankee Doodle Dandy smart boyo, backed by a high-powered publicity machine, [who has] guiled some naïve critics and many of the common mob.'<sup>13</sup> While Ó Floinn's comments contribute to the 'popular literature versus Literature' debate, I argue that by mapping the story of how Frankie surmounts his past sufferings and forges a new successful identity, McCourt, the writer, offers his audience a clear insight into one of the key trajectories of the myth of the 'American Dream'.

The eminent historian Roy Foster is one of McCourt's most ardent critics. He assumes that McCourt uses Irish nationalist stereotypes in a naïve way, and considers *Angela's Ashes* to be derivative, clichéd and unoriginal. Foster defines it as a boring and repetitive exaggeration of McCourt's Limerick childhood and youth, exemplifying a narrative that is 'skewed through selective "evidence" and a manoeuvred memory.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>See, Zoë Brennan, 'A Miserable Liar?', in *The Daily Mail*, 21 July 2009, 13-14 (p. 13). Brennan draws attention to McCourt's detractors in Limerick and their reluctance to have the reputation of the city besmirched by McCourt's memories.

Also see, Ron Kirwan, 'Is this the picture of misery in the lanes?', in *Limerick Leader*, 30 October 1997, pp. 1,4. <<http://limerickcity.ie/media/mcc118.pdf>> [accessed 1 May 2012]. This question was posed in response to a photograph of McCourt as a smiling Limerick Boy Scout.

<sup>11</sup> McCourt, 'When Irish Tongues Are Talking', in *Slate*, 27 March 2007 <[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/memoir\\_week/2007/03/when\\_irish\\_tongues\\_are\\_talking](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/memoir_week/2007/03/when_irish_tongues_are_talking)> [accessed 4 May 2007].

<sup>12</sup>Críostóir Ó Floinn, 'Into The Breach: An Analysis of *Angela's Ashes*', in *Beautiful Limerick* (Dun Laoghaire: Obelisk Books, 2004), pp. 225-242 (pp. 228,231).

<sup>13</sup> Ó Floinn, 'Into The Breach: An Analysis of *Angela's Ashes*', in *Beautiful Limerick*, p. 229.

<sup>14</sup> Roy F. Foster, 'Selling Irish Childhoods: Frank McCourt and Gerry Adams', in *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up In Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 164-186 (p. 165).

Foster articulates scepticism about McCourt's intentions, accusing the writer of favouring fabrication at the expense of accuracy, in order to offer a mere sentimentalised representation that has brought American tourists to Limerick to view gritty realism before returning to gilded America. In an effort to expose McCourt's 'particular purpose' Foster accuses him of skillfully marketing the woes of his formative years, commercialising his past and drawing on 'the complex attitude of the United States to what it expects the Irish to be.'<sup>15</sup> Of course, by its very process memoir writing is, inevitably, selective and very personal, and, potentially, somewhat embellished for the sake of publicity. However, Foster fails to consider that McCourt's status is not merely a straightforward case of emigration, and that his literary efforts may consist of a more complicated and nuanced imbrication of influences and allusions. By nationality McCourt is American, illustrated in *'Tis* when he is asked upon arrival in New York: 'And what is an Irishman doing with an American passport?'<sup>16</sup> However, because detractors like Foster have not recognised McCourt's perceptive view of the Irish-American experience they have failed to identify McCourt's own critique. It is possible that Foster has also failed to discern McCourt's witty ambiguities and to recognise and acknowledge that the memoirs reflect an awareness of the contested nature of Irish-American identity. Foster does not identify McCourt's (often withering) review of the conflicting interpretations of Ireland's history and national image that have been re-packaged and airbrushed for Hollywood consumption and popular culture.

### **Critical Framework**

This thesis focuses on McCourt's life-writing not because of its perceived quality or lack of quality, but because in the 1990s his phenomenal success and the sheer volume of book sales ensured that he provided a commonly understood cultural referent for discussing the specific topics that this thesis addresses; namely Ireland

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<sup>15</sup> Foster, 'Selling Irish Childhoods: Frank McCourt and Gerry Adams', p. 168.

<sup>16</sup> *'Tis*, p. 20.

itself, the status of the memoir genre, and Irish-American identity. McCourt subtitles each of his three texts with the term '*A Memoir*' so that the effect of his consistent use of the indefinite article alerts the reader to the idea of all three memoirs focusing on a distinct period in the unfolding of a unique life-story. However, I use the term 'life-writing' as a fluid and all-encompassing classification because it comprises the diverse genres and practices under which can be found autobiography, biography, memoir, diaries, letters, testimonies, auto-ethnography, personal essays and, more recently, digital forms such as blogs and email. It is an appropriate term to employ because of the wide range of 'texts' that I draw upon to analyse McCourt's life experience through performance. Furthermore, I deem that the expression highlights how McCourt's methodology frees him from formal autobiographical convention and his belief in the validity of random events that he has committed to memory. I make clear that McCourt is engaged in a mode of life-writing that follows his journey from boyhood to manhood in a manner that mirrors the parallel process of Ireland's journey into independence and economic prosperity when Ireland and 'Irishness' became desirable commodities. I argue that McCourt's texts function to re-connect with the past and that he utilises performance to market Irish identity successfully to a mass readership since he was able to reinforce the affiliation between his life experience and the narrative of the nation. In turn, I reveal how McCourt appeals to his Irish and American audiences simultaneously, making use of the dual nationality and fluid identity that being Irish-American affords him, whereby his texts function to condemn conditions in Éamon de Valera's Ireland at the same time that his writing exhibits a sense of nostalgia for the past.

Representations of Ireland's past in literature and film have often been an integral element of how the nation is imagined and framed, and I analyse the impact that McCourt's writing and other performances have had upon global impressions of Ireland in the era of the 'Celtic Tiger'. I offer an analysis that uses the postcolonial theories of political performance that have been developed by Victor Merriman and Joe Cleary,

both of whom emphasise the problematic postcolonial status of Ireland. They argue in different ways that the art of 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland often functions to validate Ireland's 'modernisation' by representing as 'Other' and finished an Irish past of backwardness and poverty. My investigation articulates a hitherto neglected approach to McCourt's work, and clarifies how Cleary and Merriman's ideas might be applied to a narrative strategy in which memory is paramount. For McCourt, the past is a construct that relies upon topics relevant to postcolonial discourses, such as race, religion, language and gender, all of which engender issues of difference and 'Otherness'.

Merriman contends that colonialism in Ireland was superseded by neo-colonialism so that far from representing a break from the past, the power dynamics of previous administrations were merely duplicated. Since perpetuating gender, class, racial and ethnic inequalities was crucial to the maintenance of power throughout de Valera's government, Merriman sees contemporary Ireland as a 'successor state to a colonial province of long-standing'; an entity that has betrayed and delayed the postcolonial dream. Thus, the Irish remain 'poor' because without real cultural independence, decolonisation remains a Utopia.<sup>17</sup> Merriman frames his argument through the contention that the dramas produced during the 'long 1990s' by playwrights such as Martin McDonagh and Marina Carr are revealed as sites of 'dissent, resistance and aspiration to transformation.'<sup>18</sup> According to Merriman, at a time of 'unprecedented affluence', these playwrights 'restage reductive stereotypes' to present Ireland as a 'benighted dystopia', which implicates audiences in particular negative stances towards the poor, the past and Irishness.<sup>19</sup> Merriman observes that McDonagh and Carr invite modern audiences to laugh at the 'internal outsiders' who populate their plays from a comfortable distance, relieved that "'we" have left it all behind.'<sup>20</sup> McCourt's writing uses aspects of performance and is populated by 'reductive stereotypes', which like Merriman's critique, exposes that the properly postcolonial Irish state has never really

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<sup>17</sup> Victor Merriman, *Because We Are Poor: Irish Theatre in the 1990s* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 209, 195, 196.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197, 196.

arrived. I argue that, rather than dislocating himself from the misery generated by the class, religious and political divides of De Valerian Ireland, McCourt constructs a self-conscious reconfiguration of events and invocation of stereotypes and clichés in *Angela's Ashes* in particular, that de-romanticises some of the sentimental myths, informing concepts and expectations of 'Irishness'. Thus, we see in McCourt's writing a deliberately fashioned memoir that exemplifies Merriman's evaluation.

Cleary, meanwhile, is concerned with how an artwork might operate within a marketised system in Ireland during the 'Celtic Tiger' era, and the social and cultural implications of Ireland's uncritical embrace of a form of capitalist modernisation with which to negotiate and formulate Irish identity. From Cleary's perspective, *Angela's Ashes* offers an insight into the 'Celtic Tiger' society with which its appearance coincided, highlighting in particular the remarkable transformation in Ireland's material and cultural history. When McCourt published *Angela's Ashes* in 1996, Ireland had finally emerged from economic stagnation, and the conservative Catholic state had lost its absolute power. Yet, paradoxically, much of the literature of the 'Celtic Tiger' era was apparently set in the past. I modify Cleary's standpoint and apply his ideas to consider the ways in which McCourt returns incessantly to the 'residue of an older order, the hangovers of de Valera's Ireland', rather than asking 'hard questions about either past or present.' Moreover, in Cleary's terms, *Angela's Ashes* 'compel[s]' audiences because it challenges them to confront the 'dark side of their historical past.'<sup>21</sup> Cleary's use of the term 'dark side' complements my argument in a particular way. He frames his analysis within the disassociation of past and present to articulate succinctly the associations of narrow-mindedness, thrifty conservatism, nationalism, Catholicism, emigration and stagnation with de Valera's Ireland.<sup>22</sup> Cleary's view is influenced by Jameson's idea that at the end of history there are no future beginnings

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<sup>21</sup> Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2007), p. 211.

<sup>22</sup> See Frederic Jameson, *Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 25. Jameson notes that every strong moment of rupture with an old order seems to require 'a powerful act of dissociation whereby the present seals off the past from itself and expels and ejects it.' quoted in Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 8.

to foresee. Cleary regards this as a reason why Irish writers are impelled to return to the 'dark age of de Valera', produced by a 'nostalgia for a time when there were still battles to be fought, still alternative futures [...] when the nation still had [...] weighty, decisive historical choices left to make.'<sup>23</sup> The imagination of a better future is very much bound up with the re-appropriation of the past and the unearthing of alternative historical practices and experiences. Cleary sees this 'now-conventional negative image' as a 'necessary condition' for contemporary Ireland to be constructed as the 'repudiated antithesis.'<sup>24</sup>

Cleary's reasoning amplifies my analysis of the impact of McCourt's self-construction on his audience/readership in terms of its relationship to ideas of 'Irishness'. I argue that McCourt's audiences are 'compelled' by the various ways that he uses the past to formulate debates about identity and nation that, according to Cleary, have become increasingly relevant to 'the historical analysis of culture' from the time of publication in the mid-1990s at the start of the 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom; a period that Merriman defines as a 'moment of exceptional interest in the development of Independent Ireland.'<sup>25</sup> Cleary interprets 'the obsessive return to these decades' as an intimation of a traumatic history that acts simultaneously as a 'negative validation of the present.'<sup>26</sup> He observes further that what has become known as "de Valera's Ireland" now serves as a 'reflex shorthand for everything from economic austerity to sexual puritanism, from cultural philistinism to the abuse of women and children.'<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Cleary has said specifically: 'Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* [...] offered a much more scorchingly negative and unequivocal indictment of de Valera's Ireland and an altogether more uncritically and unabashedly gung ho embrace of the American

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<sup>23</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 211.

Cleary quotes Jameson from, 'The End of Temporality, in *Critical Inquiry*, 29, (2003), 695-718 (p. 695).

<sup>24</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 8

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Cleary, 'Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture', in *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics 1949-1999*, ed. by Ray Ryan (London: Macmillan, 2000), 105-129 (pp. 108, 107).

<sup>27</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 7.

dream as the obvious alternative.<sup>28</sup> I build on Cleary's thinking, to contend that McCourt's writing provides a version of Ireland's past that permits him to contrast it with Ireland's present, while capitalising on the increased global popularity of Irishness at the time that *Angela's Ashes* was published to market a tale of Irish poverty and misery successfully. Thus, McCourt's writing exemplifies Cleary's argument that rather than seeking to exorcise such associations, the past is 'repeatedly evoked' because it serves as the 'definitive image of the anti-modern which a modernizing Ireland needed both to define itself against and to transcend.'<sup>29</sup>

In view of Cleary's observation that McCourt offers an explicit condemnation of de Valera's Ireland and an overall unapologetic, vehement hold of the 'American Dream' as the evident substitute, the thesis shows the ways in which McCourt's writing has ensured that an image of Ireland embodied in themes of cultural isolation, economic depression and literary censorship has become a fixed perception in the collective imagination and cultural production. Thus, I argue that in doing so we see the 'performative' prospective of McCourt's work and, as I show in Chapter 5, the potential that *Angela's Ashes* in particular had to market itself cleverly and to self-consciously attract tourists wishing to experience 'authentic' Limerick. Indeed, deploying these negative traits to maintain an image of 'the dark side of Irishness' was imperative to McCourt the further divorced such images became for the present reality. I argue that the purpose of McCourt's cultural representation of Ireland's enervating past (in terms of grinding poverty and the indomitable and repressive Church and State politics) is not only to create an 'Irish' version of life-writing but also to educate a contemporary audience about their good fortune in experiencing what Cleary calls a "'lucky escape" from all that earlier business.<sup>30</sup> It is this sense of "lucky escape" and, more specifically, the implication of an inherent separation between past and present, between the dark old days and 'Celtic Tiger Ireland' that I argue McCourt examines in

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<sup>28</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 231.

<sup>29</sup> Cleary, 'Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture', p. 114.

<sup>30</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 211.

Also see, Cleary, 'Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture', p.108.

what Cleary calls a 'scorchingly negative' fashion, to embrace Jameson's idea of an alternative future through a new beginning.<sup>31</sup> I make the case that *Angela's Ashes* typifies the type of autobiographical writing that has come to be associated retrospectively with those 'dark old days', and linked simultaneously to the 'Celtic Tiger' era.

### **Locating Performance**

My work appropriates Merriman's premise that in performance we can see the basic idea of Irish culture being resistant to modernism and, therefore, Ireland never properly decolonised. I combine Merriman's principle with Cleary's notion of disassociation of past and present, and his concern with the social and cultural implications of Ireland's uncritical embrace of a form of capitalist modernisation. This dual perspective permits me to argue that McCourt actually touches upon a wider set of issues in the contemporary cultural debate, revealing the extent to which his deployment of cultural memory and performances of identity function, when 'read' to either deconstruct or cement essentialist notions of nationality or ethnicity. In five distinct chapters I revise these key ideas to uncover the ways in which McCourt creates a version of 'Irishness' that is replete with recurrent clichés and stereotypical characters that epitomise what Cleary has defined as a throwback to the 'undisciplined, trashy, slovenly and rebellious old nationalist Ireland that [emigrants] wanted to leave behind.'<sup>32</sup> The crucial word here is 'create', in the sense of to artificially, consciously construct, and I make the case that the performative model that McCourt adopts exposes his purpose of fashioning a national and cultural identity of 1930s and 1940s Ireland in which he reworks and revitalises his impoverished, traumatic childhood, revealing that the identity he expresses is a conscious performance. I consider how the performative modes that permeate McCourt's writing, illuminate how his constructed representation of his lived experience crosses the

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<sup>31</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 231.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.



threshold of commodification and globalisation, yet stands in sharp contrast to the relative opulence of the era in which his writing was produced and marketed. My analysis reveals that the critical impetus in McCourt's writing around the issue of poverty is set in opposition to the cosmopolitan sophistication of the 'swinging "new Ireland"' of the 'Celtic Tiger', when Cleary argues, the country ceased to be regarded as a 'byword for repression, poverty and sexual starvation and was rebranded instead as an affluently consumerist home of the *craic*.'<sup>33</sup> With Cleary's argument at the forefront, I contend that McCourt's critique of the Ireland of *Angela's Ashes* should be understood in the context that the 'Celtic Tiger' era was not only a period of unprecedented economic prosperity but also evaluated in relation to those socio-cultural changes that Cleary outlines.

By reshaping Merriman and Cleary's ideas, I am able to prove that McCourt's aesthetic effect is created by freighting his writing with ideas and principles of performance from reference points and intertexts that are drawn from a wide range of geographical and cultural reservoirs. I reveal that McCourt's sources range from the Irish language tradition, storytelling, dance and song of Limerick, to the popular music of New York City. Further key influences for McCourt are Hollywood films, Limerick and New York memoirs, Joycean literature and the tropes of stage and screen melodrama and theatre. I show that by using performance, McCourt is able to emulate elements of writing and corresponding themes that had been offered previously by Dion Boucicault, James Joyce and Séan O'Casey. Thus, the many recognisable tropes that McCourt appropriates from films, songs, memoirs, stage performance and other sources, provide a meta-textual 'framework' by which his experiences are organised and given meaning for a global audience to understand. I employ a method of analysis that couples close-readings of McCourt's life-writing with attention to socio-cultural context, aesthetic form and issues of representations of 'Irishness'. I also consult McCourt's writing for stage performance, personal emails, interviews, personal appearances,

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<sup>33</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 265.

broadcasts and sound recordings. The thesis analyses how and why these diverse performance tropes and recognisable signifiers of 'Irishness' are deliberately deployed by McCourt as writer to make particular points about his Irish-American identity and to appeal to diverse audiences across both the American and global market.

### **Critical Perspectives on Life-Writing and Performance**

A further framework employed in this thesis is Phillip Zarilli's explanation of 'performance' as a 'mode of cultural action that is not a simple reflection of some essentialized, fixed attributes of a static, monolithic culture but an arena for the constant process of renegotiating experiences and meanings that constitute culture.'<sup>34</sup> Zarilli statement quite rightly stresses the wider pragmatic and cultural context of performance, particularly the political and cultural considerations that shape theatre and culture. Zarelli argues that our ideas can fluctuate when transferred from the immediately experiential to an historical plane of thought, and that an individual can be empowered through cultural inscription and recognition. Zarilli's model supports my argument that theatre functions to make culture intelligible because it operates to define, and often contest simultaneously, self, identity, representation and context. In Chapter 1, I make the case that producers of *Angela's Ashes: A Musical* attempted to represent and configure on stage, a culture that was outside their own identity space. Of course audiences can be hostile, sympathetic, critical, neutral, indifferent or informed. Hence, this thesis recognises Susan Bennett's idea of different kinds of audience and modes of reception, and the audience's role in creating the meaning of a theatrical event, since as Bennett would have it, performance is 'always open to immediate and public acceptance, modification or rejection by those people it addresses.'<sup>35</sup> Drawing on Hans Jauss's concept, Bennett analyses the pleasure of participation through interpretation, arguing that audiences interpret a text (or scene)

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<sup>34</sup> Phillip Zarilli, 'For Whom is the King a King? Issues of Intercultural Production, Perception and Reception in a Kathikali *King Lear*', in *Cultural Theory and Performance*, ed by Joseph Roach and Janelle Reinelt (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 16-40 (p. 16).

<sup>35</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 67-68.

by bringing their own 'horizon of expectation', to a theatrical event.<sup>36</sup> Key to Bennett's assertion is the notion that not only is interpretation culturally encoded and shaped by personal experience, it can also be influenced by information received before, during, and after the event from critics, acquaintances and other sources. According to Bennett, successful audience involvement requires membership of a unified community that have shared experiences alongside familiarity with the codes and conventions of theatrical performance. She therefore proposes a model of reception in which the audience views performance through a culturally constructed 'outer frame' that interacts with an 'inner frame' from which the visual and aural signs are understood.<sup>37</sup> When Bennett's reasoning is applied to McCourt's work we can see that the key concepts of 'Irish', 'life' and 'life-writing' have varied significantly during the last two decades and have helped to produce some widely varying assessments of McCourt and his writings. In Bennett's terms 'both the 'interpretive community and shifts in 'horizon of expectations' determine the nature of response', and it is the audience which 'finally ascribes meaning and usefulness to any cultural product.'<sup>38</sup>

Although the geographical entities are obviously discrete, there is a long tradition of travel and cultural influence that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to discern the authentically 'Irish' or 'American', so that a blended identity is better determined. Indeed, as the work of Benedict Anderson has shown, we cannot assume that a nation is a fixed collection of characteristics.<sup>39</sup> In fact, McCourt self-consciously engineers a binary opposition between Ireland and America by engaging with Ireland through Irish-American eyes when he says in *Angela's Ashes*: 'Day and night I dream of America' (p.415). We shall see the ways in which he displays a confusion about the 'performance' of his diverse roles and the subsequent tensions between his American

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<sup>36</sup> Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, pp. 2, 113.

See Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 23-25. According to Jauss 'an horizon of expectation' permits the determination of 'artistic character by the kind and the degree of its influence on a pre-supposed audience.'

<sup>37</sup> Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, pp. 139-142.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 156.

<sup>39</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On The Origins And Spread Of Nationalism*, 2nd edn. (London: Verso, 2003).

and Irish-American self, particularly as McCourt himself mocks and problematises a binary reading of Irish-American culture. Thus, a performative model of identity formation exposes McCourt's strategies and allows a greater insight into the hybridised nature of his literary persona. Yet this thesis does not seek to reject a national selfhood entirely, but rather aims to keep such an identity open by demonstrating that McCourt's reconstruction of Limerick and New York reveals a hybrid self-representation, which both embraces and exploits elements of commonly recognised national tropes and themes.

In his life-writing McCourt demonstrates how past events can be re-performed in the present, using multiple representations of 'Irishness' to market and express ethnic identity to a global audience at a specific moment in time. Furthermore, we shall see that in real-life forums such as interviews, book readings, book signings and keynote addresses, McCourt performs as the literary character that he constructs for himself in his life-writings through the Irish syntactical construction of grammar, idiom and dialect. My contention is affirmed by Malcolm Jones's cliché-ridden observation: 'Mccourt [...] knows just how much personal lore to confide in an interview [...] throw in a slight Irish brogue, offset it with a sardonic sense of his own heritage [...] and you can see why Scribner's Eisemann says, "Frank and *Angela's Ashes* are a majestic combination: a book that talks and an author who talks".'<sup>40</sup> Jones is suggesting that autobiographical writings usually tend towards a serious introspection of one's life, while highlighting McCourt's proclivity for performance. Although McCourt offers a sombre view of the social, cultural and political implications that surround the concept of 'Irishness', his theatrical blending of the comic with the tragic is displayed both in his writings, in personal encounters and at his many public speaking forums. I want to consider here how these acts of 'performance' illuminate further the overall 'construction' of McCourt's oeuvre. Thus, a pertinent framework of reference is Stephen

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<sup>40</sup> Malcolm Jones Jr., 'From 'Ashes' to Stardom: Frank McCourt's Tragicomic Tale of Growing Up Poor in Ireland is the Woebegone Publishing Industry's Cinderella Story of the Decade', in *Newsweek*, 130.8 (25 August 1997), 66–70 (p. 68).

Greenblatt's notion of 'self-fashioning'. Although he discusses the term in a completely different context, that is, the social and cultural context of sixteenth-century England, the idea of self-fashioning is adopted in this thesis (albeit divorced from Greenblatt's Renaissance oeuvre) and applied to McCourt as a twentieth-century author. Greenblatt proposes that during this period there was a trend of individuals in art and literature to consciously fashion themselves and construct an identity through clothing and symbols and style. Consequently, the idea of self-fashioning is the 'deliberate shaping in the formation and expression of identity' within 'control mechanisms' formed from certain social and cultural codes and conventions that govern social and cultural behaviour.<sup>41</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I adapt the concept to clarify how self-fashioning relates to performance, and to verify that McCourt consciously styles himself through what Greenblatt labels a 'manipulable, artful process', but according to some perceived/clichéd/mythical 'Irishness' while, simultaneously, being quite aware of this and challenging these control mechanisms and codes.<sup>42</sup> I argue that in his writing we can see McCourt enacting Greenblatt's insistence that the individual can both fashion himself and become fashioned by 'cultural institutions' like family, religion and state.<sup>43</sup> We shall see the extent to which McCourt has been influenced by these institutions so that his readership can gain an insight into his representation of his impoverished past and contrast it with the comparable more affluent era in which *Angela's Ashes* was published.

There is of course a well known idea of the writer-as-exile, from Euripides to Joyce and O'Casey, but what is striking about the opening of *Angela's Ashes* is that McCourt disturbs this dominant biographical paradigm: his story is not the familiar one of a writer who leaves home and stays away, but that of a writer who experiences a strange kind of returned emigration:

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<sup>41</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four, my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone (p.1).

McCourt is drawing attention to his hybrid identity, but this admission comes at some cost and raises the question of his credibility as an Irish commentator. In order to be considered an 'Irish' writer McCourt therefore mobilises certain forms of behaviour that are popularly understood as Irish. I argue that McCourt engages in the act of self-fashioning to construct a form of 'Irishness' that is defined by recognisable signifiers: including Catholic ritual, nationalist songs, storytelling and popular expressions of identity including traditional Irish music and festivals like 'Bloomsday' celebrations.

### **What is 'Irishness'?**

The thesis engages with the dual locations of Limerick and New York where McCourt negotiates his cultural identity in a specific historical period. It attempts to show an appreciation of the historical nature of the issues discussed and the ways in which McCourt's experience contributes to the pattern of the life that he reconstructs in his memoirs. Seamus Deane asserts that Irish autobiography is a vessel for those who seek 'through personal experience, self-examination, reconsideration of historical events and circumstances, to identify the other force, the hostile or liberating energy which made the self come into consciousness', and thus articulates succinctly why McCourt's autobiographical purpose of projecting 'Irishness' is just as significant as, for example, McCourt's age, class, gender or religion.<sup>44</sup> The various specific signifiers that might denote an 'Irish' identity in New York during the 1990s might be formed through rhetoric and fantasy and such clichés of tourist iconography like St Patrick's Day, 'the gift of the gab', green beer, and leprechauns. There are numerous variations of the Irish stereotype such as the Irish Colleen, which is in fact a corruption of the Irish word 'cailín' (girl), and who was traditionally figured as a virginal waif, but who has

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<sup>44</sup> Seamus Deane, 'Autobiography and Memoirs, 1890-1980', in *The Field Day Anthology of Modern Irish Writing*, 3 vols, ed by Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day, 1991), Vol. 3, 380-385 (p. 380).

increasingly appeared as knowing, sexually experienced, and a figure of narrative agency. Moreover, ethnicity has become less rooted in notions of essence as the concept of 'Irishness' has become more commodified through reliance upon Irish stereotypes and the presumption that the Irish have an innate penchant for self-expression exhibited through a love of dance, music, storytelling and sociability. Of course, these artificial and deliberately fabricated signifiers illustrate how Irish cultural nationalism can be expressed through performance, particularly in the context of Ireland gaining legitimacy by claiming unique artistic traits. These qualities function symbolically by adopting a particular resonance with concepts of performance culture because they represent diverse material practices that produce national identity. While these aforementioned attributes are the clichés of tourist iconography, the Yeats scholar and tenor Jim Flannery has said: 'In the bardic tradition, the Irish have always been artists and scholars – complete people.'<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, the *Las Vegas Sun* quoted the opinion of eminent historian Carl Wittke, to underscore how U.S. St Patrick's Day celebrations act as a catalyst for how stereotypical characteristics are employed as trans-national signifiers: 'The so-called Irish temperament is a mixture of flaming ego, hot temper, stubbornness, great personal charm and warmth, and a wit that shines through adversity.'<sup>46</sup> Of course, these cultural legacies are all strongly charged modes of performance through which McCourt's writing 'speaks' and the thesis deploys textual examples to establish how he creates stereotypical characters that emerge as global signifiers of 'Irishness'. I argue that in his life-writing McCourt creates a clichéd, Hollywoodised representation of Limerick life, replete with stage Irish figures and stock situations that conform to the expectations of his Irish-American readers.

My analysis explicates how McCourt condenses some of these ethnic registers into writing that also abounds with the exploitation of physiognomic signifiers, vivid

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<sup>45</sup> Jim Flannery quoted by Julia McNamara and Jim Smith, in *The Irish Face in America* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2004), p. 128).

<sup>46</sup> Carl Wittke quoted by John Mowbray in, 'Where I Stand: Irish a mix of ego, stubbornness, great charm and wit', in *Las Vegas Sun*, 17 March 1997[17 March 1966]  
<<http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/1997/mar/17/where-i-stand-irish-a-mix-of-ego-stubbornness-grea/>>  
[accessed 14 January 2014].

characterisation and self-aware use of generalisation. For example, through the character that he gives to his father, I scrutinise how McCourt exposes clichés and exploits stereotypes deliberately for comic and dramatic effect, thereby suggesting the persistence of essentialist readings of authenticity and ethnic identity. At many times, the debilitating stereotypes associated with McCourt's father are deliberately framed in *Angela's Ashes* by the use of Irish music, the characters and themes of which suggest the self-referential model that this father is adopting. In addition, I interpret how music helps to reveal how 'Irishness' is reimagined in an American context, and we find McCourt's writing merging traditional music with American popular cultural signifiers such as jazz. This hybrid amalgam of Irish traditional music with American innovation is a means of activating McCourt's memory in order to develop the autobiographical nature of the narrative through allusion and reference.

### **Commodified 'Irishness' in 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland**

The historical moment in which McCourt's writing first appeared can be affiliated with historical developments such as the peace process in the North of Ireland. In this context, the old iconography of 'Mother Ireland', which McCourt makes central to his writing, was undergoing substantial transformation (as demonstrated in the sexually-charged gyrations of *Riverdance*, the abandonment of widespread Marian devotion, and the 'tough mothering' of a figure like Mo Mowlam), all of which made 'Irishness' curiously newsworthy and indeed fashionable. It is unsurprising that Ireland's new-found cultural profile provoked Cleary's concern with how an artwork might operate within a marketised system during the 'Celtic Tiger' era, and the cultural implications of Ireland's uncritical embrace of a form of capitalist modernisation with which to negotiate and formulate Irish identity. Indeed, the period saw a number of changes in the development of the Irish memoir, and the way in which the genre was being perceived and discussed. Liam Harte claims that the 'copycat texts' that McCourt 'spearheaded' are proof that autobiographical writing 'in its many forms' became endemic in 'Celtic Tiger Ireland' in the early 1990s because of a departure from the



confessional box to the confessional memoir.<sup>47</sup> Yet, even though Andrew Clark of *The Guardian* has defined McCourt as 'the father of the misery memoir', McCourt did not usher in the late 1990s plethora of contemporary family memoirs single handedly.<sup>48</sup> While he wrote before the genre became formulaic, Blake Morrison, Mary Karr, Pete Hamill and Tobias Wolff are among those who published 'confessional' memoirs prior to *Angela's Ashes*.<sup>49</sup> All these texts deal with what George O'Brien calls 'the troubled status of the father in post-war Irish writing.'<sup>50</sup> Crucially, in this period, the reader's reception and interpretation of Irish memoir was being challenged by the narrative tropes, rhetorical aims and stylistic strategies of Roddy Doyle, John McGahern and Nuala O'Faolain as well as the much earlier descriptions of the migrant's personal development and growth that are outlined in Betty Smith's American *Bildungsroman*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.<sup>51</sup> As O'Faolain observes when reflecting upon the 1996 publication of her first memoir, *Are You Somebody?*: 'The timing was perfect. Ireland, at the end of the twentieth century, was beginning to allow self-knowledge. Some of the worst, most brutal stories about life in Irish institutions had already been told, and there had already been revelations from the sacred site of the family too.'<sup>52</sup> While O'Faolain is obviously referring to the exposure of child abuse in some Irish Catholic establishments, she is also highlighting the demise of the confessional culture in Ireland as well as the reading public's voyeuristic appetite for salacious memoirs. Such

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<sup>47</sup> Liam Harte, 'Introduction: Autobiography and the Irish Cultural Moment', in *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1-13 (pp. 1-2).

<sup>48</sup> Andrew Clark, 'Frank McCourt – father of the misery memoir, child of the slums – dies at 78', in *The Guardian*, 20 July 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/20/frank-mccourt-died>> [accessed 21 July 2009].

Clark historicized McCourt as the 'father of the misery memoir', substantiated by the sales of *Angela's Ashes* having reached more than ten million copies in the United States alone by the time of McCourt's death.

<sup>49</sup> Blake Morrison, *And When Did Your Last See Your Father?* (London: Granta, 1993).

Mary Karr, *The Liars' Club: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

Pete Hamill, *A Drinking Life: A Memoir* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1995).

Tobias Wolff, *This Boy's Life: A Memoir* (New York: Grove Press, 1989).

<sup>50</sup> George O'Brien, 'Memoirs of an Autobiographer', in *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, ed. by Liam Harte, 214-238 (p. 221).

<sup>51</sup> Roddy Doyle, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (London: Vintage, 1998[1993]).

John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

Nuala O'Faolain, *Are You Somebody? The Life and Times of Nuala O'Faolain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1998).

Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (London: Mandarin Fiction, 1992[1943]).

<sup>52</sup> O'Faolain, *Almost There, The Onward Journey of a Dublin Woman* (London: Penguin, 2003) p. 59.

voyeurism might be connected with a broader cultural trend in the 1990s towards 'reality' TV, the newfound distribution of personal images and experiences on the Internet, and the popularity of supposedly 'amateur' films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).<sup>53</sup>

McCourt's success is a manifestation of a broader cultural trend when Ireland enjoyed an unprecedented level of accomplishment that marked it as a land of cultural vibrancy. As Cleary has said: 'The Celtic Tiger of the 1990s may have been attempting to get away as fast as it possibly could from de Valera's Ireland, but in the literary, dramatic and cinematic worlds Ireland continued to be the biggest business in town.'<sup>54</sup> This cultural Renaissance began with the success of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* in 1990, which was followed closely by several Eurovision Song Contest wins, 'Oscar' nominations and awards for Irish films such as Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) and Jim Sheridan's *The Field* (1990). *In the Name of the Father* (1994), *The Boxer* (1997) and *Into the West* (1992) enjoyed subsequent international success at the box office.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, other writers dealt with the Irish immigrant experience in the United States, and particularly in New York, including Paul Quinn's *This is My Father* (1997) and Eugene Brady's *The Nephew* (1998).<sup>56</sup> Notable theatrical successes were scored by Irish playwrights such as Martin McDonagh, Marina Carr, Conor McPherson and Marie Jones. Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize and Roddy Doyle the Booker Prize, not to mention the pop-culture achievements of U2, Boyzone, Westlife and The Corrs. The wider appeal of popular Irish culture was epitomised by the soundtrack to the film *Titanic*, the success of the sitcom *Father Ted*, and the television drama *Ballykissangel*. Moreover, the popularity of Irish themed bars gives a mere snapshot of Ireland's make-over on the global stage in the 1990s when McCourt's

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<sup>53</sup>*The Blair Witch Project*, written and direct. by Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, produced by the Hazan Films Production Company (1999).

<sup>54</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 209.

<sup>55</sup>Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990); *Riverdance* (1994); *The Crying Game*, directed by Neil Jordan (1992).

<sup>56</sup> Jim Sheridan, Director, *The Field*, (1990), *In the Name of the Father* (1993), *The Boxer* (1997), *Into The West* (1992); Paul Quinn, Director, *This is My Father*, (1997); Eugene Brady, Director, *The Nephew* (1998).

tale of a 'miserable, Irish Catholic childhood' became a marketable source of autobiographical material.<sup>57</sup> This feeds into my previous comment about **popular** culture that is solely dedicated to a discussion of McCourt's writing being **popular** rather than worthy of academic interest. Consequently, McCourt's work is much known but little analysed: in that respect this thesis serves as an important corrective to this critical dismissal.

The status of *Angela's Ashes* as a symbol of Irish culture was brought about by a specific American influence on the marketing of Irish art forms at the peak of the 'memoir boom' in this period. McCourt uses the dual identity that being Irish-American afforded him to create a clear historical dimension because of the disparity between the time and setting of *Angela's Ashes* and its publication. As Cleary has stressed, such texts made purposeful return to the trauma of mid-century deprivation and moral repression that 'could not be fully assimilated at the time of its occurrence.'<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, Luke Gibbons contends that this discrepancy in time is endemic to modern Irish life-writing and indicates that 'the experience of pain and suffering may not coincide with its moment of articulation, often leaving a considerable time-lag before a catastrophe or shock to the system achieves any kind of symbolic form.'<sup>59</sup> McCourt has said that he could not write until after his mother's death and until being poor had ceased to be a 'source of shame', thereby highlighting the cathartic function of life-writing for the author.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, *Angela's Ashes* exemplifies a text of the type that Cleary and Merriman argue makes a resolute return to the ordeal of paucity and moral suppression that could not be articulated fully at the time of its incidence. While all three of McCourt's memoirs are marketed by Scribner as being written by an 'Irish' writer, this is not as straightforward as it may seem. This thesis is concerned with the

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<sup>57</sup>*Titanic*, directed by James Cameron (1997); *Fr. Ted*, by Hat Trick Productions for Channel 4 (1995-1998); *Ballykissangel*, BBC Northern Ireland (1996-2001); *Angela's Ashes*, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 209.

<sup>59</sup> Luke Gibbons, 'The Global Cure? History, Therapy and the Celtic Tiger', in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, ed. by Paedar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto, 2002), 89-108 (p. 95-96).

<sup>60</sup> McCourt quoted by Carolyn T. Hughes, 'Looking Forward to the Past: A Profile of Frank McCourt', in *Poets And Writers* (Sept/Oct 1999), 22-29, (p. 27).

way that McCourt constructs his fictive self-portrayal and argues that the aforementioned diverse range of cultural influences actually demolishes any simplistic notion of McCourt as either an uncomplicated American or Irish writer. Moreover, *Angela's Ashes* in particular, embodies Merriman's argument that the properly postcolonial Irish state never really arrived, while exemplifying Cleary's concern with how an artwork of 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland was apparently set in the past.

### **Critical Perspectives on Life-Writing**

Liam Harte's important book, *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society* is the first volume to concentrate on how the Irish autobiographical tradition has been expressed from the nineteenth century to the present day.<sup>61</sup> Harte singles out *Angela's Ashes* to contend that within Irish literature, life-writing can be declared a 'Cinderella genre' if weighed against the 'welter of scholarship on Irish poetry, drama and fiction.'<sup>62</sup> Expectations of the 'Irish memoir' had been shaped by a self-consciously literary tradition of Irish writing in English (by figures such as James Joyce, Séan O'Casey and Lady Augusta Gregory); by a political tradition of the 'rebel' memoir (by figures such as Wolfe Tone and Gerry Adams); and by a Catholic confessional culture that encouraged the mediated relating of personal experiences, particularly those of a titillating or sordid nature.<sup>63</sup> At times, as Harte points out, the memoir writing of Irish literary figures has been sidelined as a strange peripheral interest rather than something that is core to understanding a writer's career and work: Séan O'Casey, for example, is widely known today as a playwright, even though he published more than half a million words of autobiography, in six volumes, between 1939 and 1954.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Harte, ed., *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>62</sup> Harte, 'Introduction: Autobiography and the Irish Cultural Moment', in *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>63</sup> Theobald Wolfe Tone, *The Autobiography of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, abridged and ed. by Sean O'Faolain (London: Thomas Nelson, 1937).

Gerry Adams, *Falls Memories: A Belfast Life* (Colorado: Rinehart Publishers, 1982).

<sup>64</sup> See Séan O'Casey, *Autobiographies 1* (London: Pan Books, 1980), and *Autobiographies 2* (London: Pan Books, 1980).

McCourt's readers and reviewers approached his writing with a hermeneutic framework that had been developed by these earlier examples of literary memoirs. Critics hypothesise the memoir form in terms of relevant motifs in the Irish literary tradition such as the tragicomic and the theme of exile, which itself is a culturally coded script for the Irish writer. McCourt's work was initially marketed as possessing the prevailing signifiers and performatives of 'Irishness' and understood by many readers as being an uncomplicated example of 'Irish memoir'. Therefore, I argue that such a framing encoded certain expectations, both about the form and the subject matter of McCourt's work. McCourt's statement in the first lines of *Angela's Ashes* announces a pessimistic perspective: 'Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood' (p.1). Such established signs form what is, in Harte's terms, the 'cultural script' by which McCourt's writing could be measured and judged.<sup>65</sup>

In addition, according to sociologist Maurice Halbwachs's concept of 'collective memory' (*mémoire collective*), a constructed past mediates a group's feeling of togetherness.<sup>66</sup> McCourt's work is often concerned with the way that individual group members might not feel particularly bonded. Hence, when McCourt mobilises a communal sense of national struggle through nationalistic songs, those songs are associated with McCourt's father, a character who, as we shall see in Chapter 2, is profoundly alienated from those around him in Limerick. Those songs call to mind a form of national/ethnic identity that is communal, shared, narrated and transmitted through performance to resonate across groups and subsequent generations. This exemplifies how cultural memory describes those transformative historical experiences that define a culture, even as time passes and it adapts to new influences. Yet the flawed, truncated and distorted way in which McCourt's father accesses these songs emphasises only his own lack of affinity with such notions of community and solidarity. Hence, we see in McCourt's work a rearticulation of Halbwachs's idea that, with group memory, 'we

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<sup>65</sup>Harte, 'Loss, Return, and Restitution: Autobiography and Irish Diasporic Subjectivity', in *Modern Irish Autobiography*, 91-110 (p. 93).

<sup>66</sup>Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992[1922]), pp. 52-53.

cannot properly understand their relative strength and the ways in which they combine within individual thought unless we connect the individual to the various groups of which he is simultaneously a member.<sup>67</sup> Halbwachs is suggesting that we use social frameworks when we remember because personal memory is always situated within a collective or group consciousness. Memory might feel personal to the individual, but it is always influenced by shared memories, whether at a family, community or national level. When Halbwachs's argument that the strong influence of social processes allows the past to be remembered very differently is applied to McCourt's work, we can see the ways in which autobiographical memories are inseparable from the social standards of plausibility and authenticity they embody. Thus, analysing McCourt's life-writing from Halbwachs's perspective allows access to McCourt's memories through language and frameworks deemed acceptable and understandable by his audience.

With regard to analysing the relationship between McCourt's purpose, his audience and the elements and structure of his narrative, Philippe Lejeune's notion of the presence of 'the autobiographical pact' is also helpful. Lejeune contends that life-writing must be written from a standpoint that reflects a coherent view of the past, with the text's generic authenticity being underwritten by the pact. This will guarantee that the autobiographical subject (the author) is easily identifiable to the reader as the narrator or character in the narrative.<sup>68</sup> McCourt's strengthening of the autobiographical pact is achieved through crafted dialogue and realistic characterisation that creates a sense of intimacy. As the narrator, he is assuredly the same person whose name appears as the author – a pledge that the story represents the truth of his experience. However, McCourt's posture of conveying experience through the voice of his child self in *Angela's Ashes* conceals the fact that he is writing in the present and authoring his memoir with the conscious knowing mind of the adult, which of course highlights the 'performative' aspect of McCourt's memoir. The issue of the 'autobiographical pact'

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<sup>67</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>68</sup> Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact', in *On Autobiography*, ed by Paul John Eakin, trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3-30 (pp. 4-5, 14, 19).

leads to the key focus in Chapter 5 on the ways that McCourt engages in performative behaviours in a transnational environment in which he undertakes keynote addresses and readings from his memoirs in public forums. However, I argue that McCourt manipulates, defies, subverts or plays creatively with his script, particularly at moments when his readers are lulled into believing that they are sharing an agreed interpretive milieu. We shall see how such moments expose an intentional performative aspect in McCourt's writing, particularly when he deliberately diverges from a pre-imagined ethnic behavioural script, foregrounding the 'acting' involved in adopting unexpected national or cultural behaviours. In Chapter 4, meanwhile, we shall see how McCourt's adoption of an ethno-racial identity occludes the more complex narrative that is a further premise of this thesis, that his re-imagining of lived experience has been influenced by literary precursors Dion Boucicault and Seán O'Casey. I provide evidence of just how familiar McCourt was with the work of both these playwrights and establish how McCourt's writing mirrors the way that they represent an Irish past of backwardness.

When identifying the conventions of life-writing, a frequently cited definition that provides fertile terrain for debating the divide between fact and fiction is Lejeune's proposal that an autobiography is a '[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.'<sup>69</sup> It is the notion of 'the story' that has caused Foster to challenge the reliability of McCourt's life-writing because of the historian's contention that the autobiographical source is unreliable in relation to the historical archive. Foster rejects McCourt's proposal that memory is an alternate, legitimate source of historical truth, and Foster's derision stems from a refusal to acknowledge that subjectivity is embedded within life-writing. In that regard, Lawrence Phillips observes that although memoir in particular has many of the stylistic features of fiction, it is this challenge to

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<sup>69</sup> Lejeune, *Moi aussi* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986), p. 14.

objectivity that makes life-writing distinct from fiction or history.<sup>70</sup> Paradoxically, it is insufficient to dismiss the autobiographical text as flawed because it is constructed too heavily from facts to be literary, yet is too subjective to be considered history. Phillips is substantiating his claim that both the historian and the literary critic would rather ignore the problematic relationship of autobiography to both literature and history. Furthermore, an autobiographical text, by definition, relies heavily upon literary techniques that are entrenched in subjectivity. As Carolyn Steedman has said, history and autobiography work in the same way as narrative. They use the same linguistic structure, and they are both fictions, in that they 'present variations and manipulations of current time to the reader.'<sup>71</sup> Such contradictions are too acutely entrenched for the literary critic for whom the problem is the applicability of extra-textual material to the reading of the literary text. This quandary, alongside Foster's critique, is illuminated by René Rémond's contention that a long tradition has taught historians to be on their guard against subjectivity, 'their own as much as others.' Rémond argues further: 'They know from experience the precariousness of recollection, the unreliability of first-person testimony. Their professional training has taught them that everyone has an unconscious tendency to introduce a factitious coherence into the path of his life.'<sup>72</sup> However, the paradox is that historians also rely on subjective sources that include diaries, journals, letters, interviews, speeches, memos, manuscripts and other first-person accounts like memoirs and autobiographies. McCourt uses performance techniques to capture the relationship between cause and effect and to present his thoughts and feelings about an historical moment in relation to those who shared the same social setting. I argue that McCourt's exploration of 'self' displays a conscious understanding of the tensions between social and historical accounts of subjectivity, and that his readers (and spectators/auditors) are able to engage with his subjective

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<sup>70</sup> Lawrence Phillips, 'Writing Identity into Space: Ethnography, Autobiography, and Space in Bronislaw Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* and Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*' <<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/023/phillips.htm> > [accessed 4 May 2008].

<sup>71</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography and History* (Rivers Oram Press, 1992), p. 48.

<sup>72</sup> René Rémond, 'Le Contemporain du contemporain', in *Essais d'ego-histoire*, ed. by Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 293-333 (p. 294).



experience in a way that a historical resource that strove for objectivity and empirical precision would find it more difficult to convey.

Harte's assertion about the declining influence of the Catholic confessional culture in Ireland is illustrated by the sense of 'Irishness' that McCourt imbues in his writing through immersion in Catholic ritual, as well as the notion of the 'journey' of the writer. Echoing Joyce, therefore, McCourt's own 'exile' frees him from religious constraint, fuels his desire to experience the wider world and enables the orphosis of the writer. Of course, Joyce gives McCourt a ready-made template for understanding the art of his narrative in these terms, and McCourt addresses the same themes as Joyce's fictional counterpart, as we shall see in Chapter 5. McCourt's trilogy is concerned with issues of nation and national identity, emigration, poverty, education, family, cultural isolation, literary censorship, sexuality, sectarianism and political activity. However, in the contemporary age of intrusive journalism defined by Nancy Miller as 'the evolution of confessional culture', the reader has come to expect nothing other than to have similar material mirrored within autobiographical writing.<sup>73</sup> McCourt is quite knowing about this, and the direct personal voice that he uses in his writing for ironic asides tends to have an effect similar to the dramatic device of 'breaking the fourth wall' by straddling the boundary between McCourt and his audience through direct confrontation.

### **The Child Self**

Maeve McCusker argues that the rise of 'memory' as a literary preoccupation has seen writers rediscover childhood autobiography, identifying in it a powerful vehicle for exploring personal and collective experience.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Roy Pascal proposes that texts that focus primarily on the subject's early years, rather than framing them in

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<sup>73</sup>Nancy K. Miller, *But Enough About Me. Why We Read Other People's Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 1-2.

Also see Sean Ryder, '“With a Heroic Life and a Governing Mind” Nineteenth-Century Irish Nationalist Autobiography', in *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, 14–31 (p. 31). Ryder believes that the contemporary reader is conditioned to expect self-revelation from memoir.

<sup>74</sup>Maeve McCusker, 'Small Worlds: Constructions of Childhood in Contemporary Postcolonial Autobiography in French', in *Romance Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, (November 2006), 203-214.

relation to a broader portrait of the adult, represent 'the purest form of autobiography.'<sup>75</sup> Yet, we must be aware of the essential falsity, or tendency towards fictionalising, that is inherent in this approach. Steedman, for example, argues that between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries the 'idea of childhood' became 'representative, or emblematic, of adult interiority', a process in which literary representations, nineteenth-century scientific inquiry, and Freudian psychoanalysis all played their part.<sup>76</sup> McCourt comes to a similar kind of realisation in *Teacher Man* (and some of his public interviews) when he reflects upon Freud's premise that child-parent attachment plays a vital role in socially valued standard of conduct.<sup>77</sup> McCourt makes a covert acknowledgement of the 1990s confessional culture, realising that childhood is a liminal and unbounded moment that itself is something of a socially constructed fiction, dependent upon varying historical norms for its own valence. Elsewhere, McCourt defends his form of life-writing by arguing for the treatment of memoir as a distinct genre with its own stylistic features:

*Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis* are not autobiographies, they are memoirs – and they are not the same things. An autobiography is an attempt to bring up all the facts, and to stick to them, faithfully and chronologically. But a memoir is an *impression* of your life, and that gives you a certain amount of leeway. If an autobiography is like a photograph, then a memoir is more like a painting. So I've always said to my critics, 'This is my impression of my life, so what are you gonna do about it?'<sup>78</sup>

The American vernacular term that is embedded in the strangely aggressive last statement highlights the impact of Hollywood's construction of the pugnacious 'tough guy' character played by James Cagney whose ethnic simultaneity and influence on McCourt's self-representation is discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Of course, the degree to which the reader engages with this allusion depends upon their familiarity with this

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<sup>75</sup> Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1960), pp. 9, 84-85.

<sup>76</sup> Steedman, 'Maps and Polar Regions: A Note on the Presentation of Childhood Subjectivity in Fiction of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', in *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation*, ed. by Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift (London: Routledge, 1995), 77-92 (p. 77).

<sup>77</sup> *Teacher Man*, p. 1.

McCourt, interview with Harper Collins, Australia

<<http://www.harpercollins.com.au/author/authorExtra.aspx?authorID=50000547&displayType=interview>> [accessed 4 May 2011].

<sup>78</sup> See, Brendan O'Neill, *Frank About Memoirs*, 21 June 2001

<<http://www.spikedonline.com/Articles/00000002D136.htm>> [accessed 8 January 2007].

cinematic figure. However, from a critical perspective, McCourt is articulating in simple terms James Olney's view that writers use memory, imagination, dishonesty, exaggeration, romanticisation, and wishful thinking to formulate what he calls 'metaphors of self.'<sup>79</sup> Olney suggests that writers create a 'self' rather than merely recording their lives, and that significant patterns are created to portray the writer's subjective vision. Some of these patterns are recurring motifs composed of individual words, metaphors, images, and rhythms that provide a unifying force. The completed 'work of art' constitutes the meaning of personal experiences.<sup>80</sup> Thus, Olney focuses on the life writer's craft as an aesthetic process in which 'Artists create the pattern and impose it on experience.'<sup>81</sup> McCourt does indeed provide a distinctly subjective perspective in memoir writing. At the opening of *Angela's Ashes* he lists overtly the metaphors that provide a model for his expression:

The miserable Irish Catholic childhood [...] the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother [...] pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years (p.1).

Thus, McCourt is using metatextuality to demonstrate an awareness of exactly the kind of clichés by which his story will be measured and judged. It is this notion of metatextuality upon which I state my claim that in McCourt's writing we recognise many sources that include dance and song of Limerick, the popular music of New York City, Hollywood cinema, Joycean literature, other memoirs and tropes of stage and screen melodrama and theatre, all of which provide McCourt with a frame of reference by which his experiences are organised and given meaning for a global audience to understand. Moreover, the fact that *Angela's Ashes* emerged during Ireland's unprecedented economic boom contributes to a detailed understanding of his work. The financial success and the socio-cultural changes that occurred in the wake of the 'Celtic Tiger' meant that the past could be ignored by re-branding the present. This

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<sup>79</sup>James Olney, *Metaphors of the Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 37-38.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 268,273.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

had an inevitable influence upon life-writing, and my approach to McCourt's model is to uncover how he constructs a self-analysis that combines the condemnation of and a nostalgia for the recent past. In Cleary and Merriman's terms, this complex period enabled McCourt to construct not only a personal identity but also a personal version of history that contrasted monetary triumph with the ostensible simplistic past through emphasis upon a static economy, austerity and a sense of hopelessness.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis aims to take a close look at how in the 'Celtic Tiger' era, McCourt re-presents his former self in a way that gives his reader an insight into his version of the construction of the self in life-writing. The starting point for this analysis is to apply Cleary and Merriman's key ideas to reveal the ways in which McCourt stages Ireland as 'Other' for the purpose of constructing a personal identity alongside a subjective version of Irish history. I make obvious throughout that by deploying diverse performance tropes McCourt's writing enacts what Merriman has called 'post colonial desire', revealing that de Valera's rhetoric actually obscured the dynamics of an unequal Irish society.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, McCourt's awareness of what Merriman calls the 'radical potential' of deploying theatrical figures from the past, cements the critical strength and political significance of the performative images that McCourt deploys.<sup>83</sup> Through discussions in separate chapters, I establish how McCourt has created a set of writings that are freighted with theatrical narratives appropriated from the realm of the cinema, the pub session, the radio, the playhouse, and the music-hall. The thesis contends that these performative influences, juxtaposed with the historical, political and socio-cultural context in which he writes, permit McCourt to resurrect his version of the past at a time of increased global popularity of 'Irishness'. I argue that the overall effect of the complexities encountered by McCourt in his explorations of his own identity, provokes questioning of those notions of national identity that might be

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<sup>82</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, p. 222.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

presumed to be settled and fixed. The thesis provides evidence that 'Irishness' in McCourt's work is not a coherent and stable phenomenon, but more a palimpsest that reveals the influence of numerous other cultural ideas, many of which may originate from far outside the island of Ireland.

McCourt may be famous as the 'father of the misery memoir', but as I argue, he is also important because he helped to articulate and raise questions about Irish identity during that key 'Celtic Tiger' historical period, validating Ireland's re-branding as antithetical to the Ireland that is associated with the time of production and publication of *Angela's Ashes*.<sup>84</sup> Whereas during the 'Celtic Tiger' era, many were content simply to celebrate economic good fortune, I argue that through his original narrative structure McCourt was asking a set of more profound questions about Irish national identity, such as the clichés and 'performativity' associated with constructions of 'Irishness' in a particular time and place, as well as some key theoretical elements of life-writing like fictionality and authenticity. One of the eventual ironies of his career is that McCourt's ability to make money in the 1990s by asking those same questions has perhaps permanently connected his work with the unthinking excess and irrationality of that era. Indeed, when I spoke with Edward Hagan at the 2007 American Conference for Irish Studies in New York he remarked that 'the Irish were generally appalled' by *Angela's Ashes*, and viewed McCourt as the 'evil court jester who was trotting out the worst Irish clichés then making immense sums of money by their manipulation': an opinion reiterated in Hagan's 2010 publication *Goodbye Yeats and O'Neill: Farce in Contemporary Irish and Irish American Narratives*.<sup>85</sup> As already noted, there is a danger that McCourt's work is viewed pejoratively as 'popular' and 'simplistic', or

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<sup>84</sup> Clark, 'Frank McCourt – father of the misery memoir, child of the slums – dies at 78', in *The Guardian*, 20 July 2009.

<sup>85</sup> The American Conference for Irish Studies, *Ireland and the Americas*, The City University New York, 18-21 April 2007.

Edward A. Hagan, 'Introduction. The Donkeys and the Narrowbacks: Contemporary Circus Animals', in *Goodbye Yeats and O'Neill: Farce in Contemporary Irish and Irish American Narratives* (New York: Rodopi, 2010), pp. 3-22. (p. 11). Hagan sent me his draft for the chapter 'Defining the Object for Struggle: Epistemology in the Age of Autobiography – Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes* and Seamus Deane, *Reading In The Dark*', pp. 23-50.

Hagan's chapter first appeared as, 'Really An Alley Cat? "Angela's Ashes" and Critical Orthodoxy', in *New Hibernian Review*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Winter 2000), 39-52.

merely as 'misery porn'; the definition given to *Angela's Ashes* in 2008 by Carol Sarler of *The Daily Mail*.<sup>86</sup> Hence, I challenge McCourt's detractors' opinions and aim to show that his life-writing is in fact constructed upon a complex range of theatrical and performance principles in a more enquiring and nuanced way than such a narrative might be expected to allow. I uncover the ways in which his approach has entered into a set of key debates about identity and nation that have been happening from the 1990s onwards.

## **Chapter Overview**

### **Chapter 1 – 'Angela's Ashes In Performance'**

In this chapter I use Merriman's idea that theatre and society have the potential to interact and become a space of social transformation and utopian thought, to emphasise the overlooked performative dynamic of McCourt's best-known text, the memoir *Angela's Ashes*.<sup>87</sup> The thesis begins from this structuring principle in order to analyse how a reworking of *Angela's Ashes* for performance makes visible the mediation and presentation of 'Irishness' in the re-written text, and how this forges a relation between the past of the narrative and the present of the performance. The first part of the chapter analyses the little-known musical adaptation of *Angela's Ashes* that was staged at Derby Theatre in November 2012.<sup>88</sup> I make the case that this production was strikingly political, and made great efforts to speak to the situation of the Irish diaspora in Derby and to draw attention to the contemporary alienation caused by poverty in that city.

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<sup>86</sup> Carol Sarler, 'I'll tell you what's Ugly ... this shameful appetite for misery porn', in *The Daily Mail*, 20 November 2008 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1087604/III-tell-whats-Ugly---shameful-appetitmiseryporn.html#ixzz0ri531v32>> [accessed 14 July 2010].

<sup>87</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, p. 209

<sup>88</sup> *Angela's Ashes: A Musical*, adapted by Paul Hurt, directed by Yvonne Hurt, produced by Uncontained Arts and Theatre Works Production, music and lyrics by Adam Howell, performed at Derby Theatre, 1-3 November 2012. Adam Howell was instrumental in establishing Uncontained Arts with other post-graduates, undergraduates and lecturers from the University of Derby.

The second half of the chapter scrutinises the contrasting example of Alan Parker's film version of *Angela's Ashes*, which was released by Paramount Pictures in 1999.<sup>89</sup> I argue that, in contrast with the Derby adaptation, the Parker film evades any localising particularities that might enable a political critique of any particular nation or governmental regime to be created. Whereas the significance of the musical version of *Angela's Ashes* is that it demonstrated a contemporary relevance and made a clear comment about poverty, I argue that the Parker film neutralises any such commentary.

Each of the chapters that follow shows the work of construction and mediation in McCourt's own texts, demonstrating how ideas about re-presentation and rewriting inform the thesis. As I have already stated in this introductory chapter, I establish how McCourt achieves this by adapting Merriman's premise that in performance we can see the basic idea of Irish culture being resistant to modernism and, therefore, the Ireland that is represented in McCourt's writing demonstrates Merriman's claim that decolonisation was never achieved properly. I merge Merriman's principle with Cleary's idea of disassociation of past and present, and his concern with the social and cultural implications of Ireland's uncritical embrace of a form of capitalist modernisation.

## **Chapter 2 – 'I'd Love To Be Irish When It's Time For A Song'**

The focus in this chapter is upon McCourt's references and allusions to music and to musical performance to expose the complex struggle between his Irish and Irish-American identity. I clarify how in *'Tis*, the book that McCourt wrote after he had become prosperous and perhaps the best-selling author in the world, he seeks to highlight his affinity with New York's Afro-Caribbean jazz culture, sidestepping the issue of his whiteness and wealth, and pointing instead to a somewhat questionable postcolonial Irish identification with the black migrant. I contend that for McCourt, the

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<sup>89</sup>*Angela's Ashes*, directed by Alan Parker, produced by Alan Parker, Scott Rudin and David Brown, International distribution by Universal Pictures, (1999). U.S.A. distribution by Paramount Studio, (1999).

'American' cultural signifiers of optimism, emancipation, opportunity, redemption, universalism and multiculturalism become more pressing because Ireland embodies the signifiers, of poverty, loss and death. Thus, we see exemplified Cleary and Merriman's emphasis on the problematic postcolonial status of Ireland and witness the art of 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland operating to certify Ireland's 'modernisation' by representing as 'Other' and finished an Irish past of backwardness and scarcity. The chapter moves on to investigate McCourt's connection with the Irish-American folk ensemble, The Clancy Brothers, which allows him to blend Irish culture and heritage with 'American' culture. I make the case that McCourt uses the 'traditional' Irish music that he hears The Clancys perform as a model for formulating the assimilation of immigrant communities in New York City.

In the next section I evaluate how McCourt's unflattering accounts of his father's obsessive commitment to Irish nationalism mocks the figure of the Irish rebel rather than offering a comment directly on the nationalist cause itself. I establish how McCourt appropriates a set of lyrics that relate to experiences that he scarcely knows first hand, but which can be evoked to signify that even as a wealthy New York writer McCourt is in some way connected to a radical and/or revolutionary set of ideas. I conclude the chapter by analysing the ways in which McCourt's references to popular music culture exemplify artistic assimilation and examine the effect that the musical allusions and references to musical performances at work in McCourt's writing have upon his readership.

### **Chapter 3 – 'Are Ye Gangsters Or Cowboys? [...] Fred Astaire How Are You?'**

In this chapter I explore further the conflict between McCourt's Irish and Irish-American identity, demonstrating how the allure of 'America' becomes more pressing. I prove that McCourt deploys cinematic images to construct an idealised version of 'American' masculinity with which to substitute 'Irish' manhood and its encounter with 'American' femininity. I examine the reasons why McCourt employs "fantasy" figures



from the cinema to contrast the conservative and oppressive conditions of de Valera's Ireland with the perceived liberation that America offers. In particular, McCourt recalls matinee heroes John Wayne, James Cagney and Fred Astaire, and I make the case that the Western hero, the 'hoodlum' and the dancer are shown to provide a cultural framework for McCourt. I investigate the extent to which his performances of identity when 'read', are set in opposition to these paradigmatic stars and work to either deconstruct, or cement essentialist notions of nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, and male vulnerability.

#### **Chapter 4 – Melodramatic Moments**

I make the case in this chapter that McCourt relies upon a set of melodramatic themes that derive from the realm of the Irish playhouse. I disclose the ways in which he is indebted to the literary and performative predecessors Dion Boucicault and Seán O'Casey because they provide characters that are in some way archetypal, which permits McCourt to emulate certain stylistic features that appeal to his readership. I argue that the influence of these writers is significant to readings of McCourt, not only in terms of style and literary techniques but that these stylistic features also serve as a form of global marketing. The chapter moves on to analyse the role of music in melodrama as an audible sign of expressing the moral struggle between good and evil.

In the final section, I investigate McCourt's acting and script-writing roles to substantiate the contention that he was a well-practiced performer who was acutely aware of the effective use of dramatic tropes. I provide evidence that McCourt's involvement with Irish theatre companies in New York that staged O'Casey's plays ensured that McCourt absorbed easily the settings and melodramatic themes that he recycles consciously.

## **Chapter 5 – Frank McCourt’s Performance Of ‘Irishness’: The Anxiety of James Joyce’s Influence**

The last chapter broadens out beyond the four walls of the playhouse into a two-fold argument that examines how McCourt may be relying on a set of paradigms from Ireland’s best-known writer, James Joyce. Textual evidence from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* provides a means to investigate the extent to which Joyce’s novel has contributed to the recycling of similar elements in McCourt’s own writing.<sup>90</sup> I then examine McCourt’s role as an international literary celebrity and global entertainer in the 1990s, showing the way that re-performances of Joyce became central to McCourt’s own identity at his numerous public speaking forums. I point to the way that Joyce has been commodified and mobilised by the late twentieth-century tourist industry, and that McCourt was often dealing with such recent popular impressions of Joyce as much as with Joyce’s own writing; the commodification of Joyce himself. The chapter reveals that McCourt’s reliance upon an array of performance principles and Joycean stylistics like allusion, ventriloquism, parody, homage, saturation, imitation, cliché, Irish stereotypes, intertextuality, pastiche and mimicry, provide McCourt with the means of a critique to engage, affirm or deconstruct ‘Irishness’.

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<sup>90</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1996 [1916]).

## Chapter 1

### ***Angela's Ashes* in Performance**

*'It's not just a book; we're talking about a man's life.'*<sup>1</sup>

This chapter emphasises the overlooked performative dynamic of Frank McCourt's best-known text, the memoir *Angela's Ashes*, using Merriman's idea that theatre and society have the potential to interact and become a space of social transformation and utopian thought.<sup>2</sup> The thesis begins from this structuring principle to prove how a reworking of *Angela's Ashes* for performance makes visible the mediation and presentation of 'Irishness' in the re-written text, and how this forges a relation between the past of the narrative and the present of the performance. Hence, each of the chapters that follow exposes the work of construction and mediation in McCourt's own texts by engaging with the ways in which his writing relies upon a diverse range of performative principles and influences. For now, the first part of this chapter highlights the little-known musical adaptation of *Angela's Ashes* that was staged at Derby Theatre in November 2012.<sup>3</sup> I make the case that this production was strikingly political, and made great efforts to speak to the situation of the Irish diaspora in Derby and to draw attention to the contemporary alienation caused by poverty in that city. The performance marked out specifically, examples of what Merriman labels 'gross caricatures' of the poor who performed as 'backward' and 'overdetermined in their Irishry, especially in the areas of speech.' However, rather than the production having what Merriman describes as 'no purchase on the experiences of today's audiences', it made visible the intervention and re-presentation of 'Irishness' in the text, and highlighted the ways in which those choices forged a relation between the past of

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Parker quoted by Susan Tetlow Harrington in 'Angela's Ashes', in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 29:1, (2001), 58-61 (p. 58).

<sup>2</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, p. 209

<sup>3</sup> *Angela's Ashes: A Musical*, adapted by Paul Hurt, directed by Yvonne Hurt, produced by Uncontained Arts and Theatre Works Production, music and lyrics by Adam Howell, performed at Derby Theatre, 1-3 November 2012. Adam Howell was instrumental in establishing Uncontained Arts with other post-graduates, undergraduates and lecturers from the University of Derby.

McCourt's narrative and the present of Derby's own experiences of poverty in the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup>

I argue that the producers of *Angela's Ashes: A Musical* saw the potential that an adaptation that was set in de Valera's Ireland had to express the concerns and anxieties of the present, thereby illustrating the interventionist potential of theatre and of its reception. Moreover, the audience was offered a performance that exemplified Merriman's description of an 'art form which is a social process.'<sup>5</sup> Merriman's model foregrounds the complex relationship between history, society and theatre, and their potential to interact. He believes that as a space of utopian thought and action, theatre can demonstrate what a future community might resemble, thereby instigating democratic change and social transformation. By referring to writers, actors and directors as 'cultural workers', Merriman stresses that the task of implementing moral and social change must be assisted by an audience that is the active co-producer of the work of art during the performance.<sup>6</sup> The production exemplified Merriman notion of theatrical performance as a social process, in which both its creators and audience carry a cultural burden and responsibility to encourage self-consciousness and achieve the long-postponed decolonisation of Ireland; an argument that was appropriated and applied to the city of Derby by the producers of the McCourt musical, and one that exemplified Merriman's belief that a society can become the locus for democratic change.<sup>7</sup>

The second half of the chapter scrutinises the contrasting example of Alan Parker's film version of *Angela's Ashes*, which was released by Paramount Pictures in 1999.<sup>8</sup> I argue that, in contrast with the Derby adaptation, the Parker film evades any localising particularities that might enable a political critique of any particular nation or

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<sup>4</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, p. 196.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 70-71.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Angela's Ashes*, directed by Alan Parker, produced by Alan Parker, Scott Rudin and David Brown, International distribution by Universal Pictures, (1999). U.S.A. distribution by Paramount Studio, (1999).

governmental regime to be created. Whereas the significance of the musical version of *Angela's Ashes* is that it demonstrated a contemporary relevance and made a blatant comment about poverty, the Parker film neutralises any such commentary. Indeed, Parker's adaptation illustrates Merriman's contention that the past is all too present in theatrical works by way of images of poverty, so that the notion of the 'Celtic Tiger' remains a dystopian terror instead of a utopian desire.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Angela's Ashes: A Musical***

On 1 November 2012 I sat in the audience at the Derby Theatre in the East Midlands and watched the world premiere of *Angela's Ashes: A Musical*, adapted by Paul Hurt with lyrics and score by Adam Howell. Around me, a number of local dignitaries and international guests could be seen in the theatre: the local Lord Mayor sat wearing his official robes and chain, and members of McCourt's family (including his widow) were given prominent seats, with McCourt's brother, Alphie, drawing the attention of numerous audience members by visibly weeping with appreciation at the close of the production. For those invited staff from Limerick's Frank McCourt Museum who sat amongst the VIPs, this musical may have confirmed the international success of the McCourt 'brand'. For Alphie McCourt, the show helped to realise a dream that he had thought far from being achieved, as he told the *Derby Telegraph*: 'I always had it in my head something like this would be created out of Frank's book but just not so soon. I never thought I would live to see it.'<sup>10</sup> He extended this thought in the *Limerick Leader*: 'I have had it in my head for years. Charles Dickens was born two hundred years ago. We've had *Oliver*, the musical, so why not *Angela's Ashes*?'<sup>11</sup> By melding *Angela's Ashes* with *Oliver*, Alphie McCourt is implying that in his estimation this adaptation of Frank McCourt's life writing is commensurate with theatrical adaptations

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<sup>9</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, pp. 2, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Jones, 'Writer's widow arrives from US for musical memoir tribute', in *Derby Telegraph*, 2 November 2012 <<http://www.thisisderbyshire.co.uk/Writer-s-widow-arrives-musical-memoir-debut/story-17215025-detail/story.html>> [accessed 14 November 2012].

<sup>11</sup> Anne Sheridan, 'McCourt escapes Sandy to launch book in Limerick', in *Limerick Leader*, 1 November 2012 <<http://www.limerickleader.ie/lifestyle/entertainment/mccourt-escapes-sandy-to-launch-book-in-limerick-1-4428699>> [accessed 14 November 2012].

of canonical literature.<sup>12</sup> Of course, this opinion is particularly noteworthy given that so many critics blasted it as just 'popular'. Yet this is not the first occasion on which McCourt's writing has drawn an analogy with Dickens. *The Times* quotes Nuala O'Faolain's enthusiastic remark: 'We're getting our first Irish Dickens.'<sup>13</sup> Indeed, McCourt himself said that he had long wanted to depict Limerick's poverty in *Angela's Ashes* but felt that it was sordid and bleak and not as romantic or as charming as Dickens's poverty.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the production of *Angela's Ashes* having gained the imprimatur of the McCourt family and estate in this way, those who staged the musical were in fact doing something quite subversive with the source material. Whereas McCourt's original work makes great efforts to avoid any explicit political engagement, the Derby musical sought to raise pertinent questions about poverty and cultural impoverishment that had little to do with Limerick in the 1940s, but which had a great deal to do with Derbyshire in 2012. As I will show, *Angela's Ashes: A Musical* made a set of pertinent points about Derbyshire politics, and thus strived for a particular localised affect, something that created a disparity with the better-known dramatisation of McCourt's text, the 1999 film by Alan Parker. In sharp contrast, the film had little to do with any particular location, either in Ireland or anywhere else, but sought an international commercial success by playing upon generic and decontextualised versions of 'Irishness'.<sup>15</sup> Parker's film did not intend to agitate a confrontational reaction within the audience or to affect their lives after the performance. Even if audiences were affected adversely by the interpretations and perspectives promoted, they were unlikely to leave the cinema with a mind to challenge proactively what they had witnessed.

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<sup>12</sup> See Thierry Groensteen, ed., *La Transecriture: Pour une Theorie de l'adaptation*, Colloque de Cerisy, (14-21 August 1993), (Quebec: Editions Nota Bene, 1998), p. 270. Groensteen argues that Dickens's novels are 'adaptogenic' to the stage and screen, and 'theatrical' because of their lively dialogue and their individualised yet broadly drawn characters, complete with idiosyncratic speech patterns.

<sup>13</sup> Nuala O'Faolain, quoted in *The Times*, 21 July 2009, <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article6720501.ece>> [accessed 22 February 2010].

<sup>14</sup> McCourt, interview with Harriett Gilbert, *The Strand*, 20 July 2009, <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p003nvqk/The\\_Strand\\_20\\_07\\_2009/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p003nvqk/The_Strand_20_07_2009/)> [accessed 22 February 2010].

<sup>15</sup> *Angela's Ashes*, directed by Alan Parker, produced by Alan Parker *et al*, Paramount Pictures (1999).

## A Politicised Musical?

Seamus Deane famously condemned Seán O'Casey's Dublin trilogy, seeing it as inscribed with a limited political vision, and making it 'wrong' to regard O'Casey 'as our paradigm of a dramatist who made political preoccupation central to his work.'<sup>16</sup> Deane contends that although O'Casey's drama ostensibly engages directly with the political, O'Casey actually displaces any genuinely political discussion in favour of allowing a domestic focus to take precedence. This reading of O'Casey may be somewhat unfair but it is one that leads O'Casey to be read alongside McCourt. For example, Denis Sampson contends that *Angela's Ashes* is constructed in a 'style of rambunctious detachment' that relies on 'literary techniques of irony and comedy learned from [...] Seán O'Casey's plays.'<sup>17</sup> McCourt himself has highlighted this connection, saying that 'there is no happily ever after in Seán O'Casey.'<sup>18</sup> Chapter 4 discusses the reading of McCourt's writing through that of O'Casey's in greater depth. For now, whereas there may be considerable debate about the political affect of O'Casey's work (Deane's reading has been contested by Nicholas Grene, Rónán McDonald and James Moran amongst others) there can be little doubt about the politically defanged nature of McCourt's treatment of chronic poverty.<sup>19</sup> The famous opening of his memoir, for example, encapsulates the notion of impoverishment within a sense of sentimental nostalgia and dramatic irony:

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood (p. 1).

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<sup>16</sup> Seamus Deane, 'Irish Politics and O'Casey's Theatre', in *Threshold 24* (1973), pp. 5-16 (pp. 11-12).

<sup>17</sup> Denis Sampson, 'Voice Itself: The Loss and Recovery of Boyhood in Irish Memoir', in *Modern Irish Autobiography*, ed. by Liam Harte, 197-213 (p. 197).

<sup>18</sup> *Tis*, pp. 154 -155.

<sup>19</sup> See Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama*, p. 148; Rónán McDonald, *Tragedy and Irish Literature: Synge, O'Casey, Beckett* (London: Macmillan, 2002), pp. 94-95; James Moran, *The Theatre of Seán O'Casey* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

McCourt places immediate emphasis on 'poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire' (p.1). Here, of course, he mirrors O'Casey's method of placing prominence on the domestic, but in addition, by melding this satirical tone with the voice of the bewildered child, McCourt displaces further the potential social and political aspects that might be inherent in any discussion of poverty/postcolonial statehood relating to Ireland. The reader is not encouraged to question why the characters have ended up in a position of poverty or substance abuse, or what societal structures might need changing in order to prevent others from ending up in the same place, but instead the reader is encouraged to wallow in an empathetic sense of identification with the McCourt character. The child's-eye viewpoint both encourages a sentimentalising of the situation, as well as infantilising any political analysis, with Frankie positioned as a narrator who is too young and inexperienced to provide his own judgement.<sup>20</sup>

George O'Brien declares that McCourt's limited political engagement is evident because he 'pass[es] over in silence' an account of the 'complexity of the local in Ireland [...] lived in the particularized past', in favour of a 'latent, underdeveloped' critical discourse on 'nationalism, class, sectarianism, various forms of the Christian commandment of charity, citizenship, and the nature of public policy in the emerging nation state of Ireland.'<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the globalised version of 'Irishness' that is on display in McCourt's memoir tends to disable us from engaging with the specifics of any particular local situation. The book is hazy about the exact locations of Limerick, the way that local/national/international superstructures were in operation in that place during the 1940s, and the exact forms of opposition that might have been available to the

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<sup>20</sup>N.B. 'Frankie' is the name that McCourt sometimes gives to himself and the pet alternative that his Uncle Pa Keating and the McCourts' blind neighbour, Mrs Purcell, address him by (pp. 420, 320). I use this diminutive to distinguish McCourt the boy in the narrative from Frank, the writer and narrator.

<sup>21</sup>George O'Brien, 'The Last Word: Reflections on *Angela's Ashes*', in *New Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora*, ed. by Charles Fanning, (p. 244).

Also see, Ryszard Bartnik, 'The Comic and the Tragic in the Drama of Irish Belonging in Frank McCourt's and Dermot Healy's Autobiographies', in L. Sikorska, ed., *Ironies of Art/Tragedies of Life. Essays on Irish literature* (Peter Lang Verlag: Frankfurt, 2005), pp. 153-175 (p. 153). Bartnik also notes that McCourt uses the voice of the innocent child who does not pass judgement since he does not understand much of what is happening around him.



Limerick poor at that time. Instead McCourt presents a generic version of 'Irishness', in which an array of familiar and marketable stereotypes are on display. As I stated in the introductory chapter, McCourt's writing has provoked hostile comment from those who contend that he uses Irish nationalist stereotypes in a naïve way to create an embellished version of an 'Irish' childhood in a narrative that is twisted through crafted "facts" and contrived memory. Foster argues that McCourt simultaneously embraces and performs an identity assembled primarily from his early engagement with images of the pervasive American culture, with the exact intention of selling the wretchedness of his formative years by commercialising the past and drawing on the multifaceted approach of the United States to what it expects 'Irishness' to be.<sup>22</sup> Foster's opinion can be challenged because although McCourt relies on clichés and stereotypes, his writing itself is not vacuous, but rather reveals the vacuity of clichés and stereotypes. Foster is aware that these predictable elements are the very reason for the popular impact of *Angela's Ashes*, noting begrudgingly: 'It is what millions of people want to read (or at least to buy).'<sup>23</sup> Thus, this chapter confirms the mutual relationship between McCourt and his supporters and reveals how they have not confined themselves to the written text. I examine this association in more detail later in the thesis, showing the ways in which McCourt's followers avail themselves of other cultural products within the McCourt 'industry', thereby illustrating his ability to market the self successfully by taking advantage of the increased global popularity of 'Irishness' at the time of publication.

Derby Theatre's *Angela's Ashes: A Musical* exemplified Linda Hutcheon's key idea that adaptations are not only autonomous works but also extended re-visitations of the source text that have different functions in different cultures at different times.<sup>24</sup> In the

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<sup>22</sup> Foster, 'Selling Irish Childhoods: Frank McCourt and Gerry Adams', p. 168.

Also see, Senia Pašeta, *Modern Ireland: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 145. Pašeta contends that the commercial potential of marketing 'Irish' poverty and deprivation is based on a somewhat cynical and certainly financially savvy approach to "Irishness".

<sup>23</sup> Foster, 'Selling Irish Childhoods: Frank McCourt and Gerry Adams', p. 173.

<sup>24</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, pp. xvi, xviii.

Derby production, the opening lines were not simply a generic version of miserable Catholic 'Irishness', but were made to engage with the very real conditions of poverty that existed in Derby at the time of the production; conditions that the members of the audience may well have seen in the derelict streets outside the theatre at the back of the Westfield shopping centre. Just as the Abbey Theatre audiences who watched Rosie Redmond in 1926 would have, in all likelihood, have walked past the real-life prostitutes of Dublin, so those who walked to the Derby theatre from the nearby carparks in 2012 would have seen the boarded-up shops and derelict wasteland that adjoins the shopping centre, as well as the discomfiting presence of the local homeless in the Westfield doorways.

Nicholas Grene has said that for an Irish performance to be successful the central 'Irish' narrative must be mediated in a way that will provide an interpretative framework for an urbanised, cosmopolitan audience lacking in specialised knowledge of Ireland. Grene argues that this process succeeds by involving the use of 'stage interpreters', such as the provision of comic relief by Conn in Dion Boucicault's *The Shaughraun*.<sup>25</sup> In Grene's terms, such a narrator was also the musical's mediator at the Derby Theatre in 2012. *Angela's Ashes: A Musical* began with the narrator looking straight at members of the audience and pointing outwards. The opening song 'Angela's Ashes Are Calling You' was delivered by the character of the young Frank, who used his body, particularly the gestures of his arms and the use of his eyes, to draw attention to the theatre space in which the audience sat. Many in the audience would therefore have realised (it was pointed out prominently in the programme, and on signs in the foyer, as well as across the local media) that the theatre itself – situated in an economically deprived part of the English Midlands – had been mothballed in the recent past because of lack of funds.<sup>26</sup>

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Also see Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 26. Sanders argues that 'an adaptation signals a relationship with an informing source text or original.'

<sup>25</sup> Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama*, pp. 49,50.

<sup>26</sup> The University of Derby, 'Curtain raised on Derby Theatre Refurbishment', 29 October 2012

In 2008 the Derby Theatre, operating under the name of Derby Playhouse, had been, as *The Stage* emphasised, a 'major casualty in Arts Council England's funding overhaul.'<sup>27</sup> Following a period when the theatre's doors were shut, the University of Derby purchased the venue, then refitted, restyled and refurbished it as a "community" theatre that would give a 'platform to local artistes.'<sup>28</sup> It was consciously styled as an antidote to the middle-class type of theatrical art that might be found elsewhere. For the theatre management, it was appropriate to stage *Angela's Ashes* in a performance space that had proved its ability to rise from the ashes, and to defy social and economic disadvantage in order to create interesting aesthetic experiences. In this, the evocation of McCourt's struggle became something that was resonant with local meaning and significance. That opening and closing song, 'Angela's Ashes Are Calling You', implicated the whole of the audience in the narrative, and the insistent repetition of the personal pronoun "you", made events *seem* to be part of one's own history as well as helping the audience to focus upon exactly who else was in the theatre.

As we saw in the introductory chapter, Bennett's two-frame model differentiates between the two levels of a theatrical event and interprets how an audience decodes a particular performance. According to Bennett, the 'outer frame' consists of 'all the cultural elements that create and inform the production of a theatrical event; that is the performance itself and the playing space that houses it. Meanwhile, Bennett defines the 'inner frame' as 'the spectator's experience of the fictional stage world' and their expectations of that performance.'<sup>29</sup> The audience is situated where these two frames intersect, and Bennett explains the process succinctly: 'The spectator comes to the

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<<http://www.derby.ac.uk/news/curtain-raised-on-derby-theatre-refurbishment>> [accessed 16 November 2013].

Also see, 'Curtain Up on Derby Theatre's £80k re-vamp' in *Derby Telegraph*, 19 September 2012 <<http://www.derbytelegraph.co.uk/Curtain-Derby-Theatre-s-pound-80k-revamp/story-16934972-detail/story.html>> [accessed 16 November 2013].

<sup>27</sup> Steve Orme, 'Derby Theatre faces closure after ACE cuts – local councillor', in *The Stage*, 24 March 2011 <<http://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2011/03/derby-theatre-faces-closure-following-ace-cuts-local-councillor/>> [accessed 5 November 2012].

<sup>28</sup> 'New Era for Derby Playhouse', in *This Is Derbyshire*, 24 April 2009

<<http://www.thisisderbyshire.co.uk/New-era-Derby-Playhouse/story-11610612-detail/story.html>> [accessed 5 November 2012].

<sup>29</sup> Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, pp. 2, 139.

theatre as a member of an already constituted interpretive community and also brings an horizon of expectation shared by performance elements.<sup>30</sup> These preconceived notions of what is an appropriate performance are part of commonly acknowledged theatre conventions. When Bennett's terminology is applied to the Derby production of *Angela's Ashes*, we are able to identify the different expectations of the Derby audience. In particular, we can see how audience members from both the Irish diaspora and the local area constituted a distinctive interpretive community that concentrated on the way that the production engaged with both McCourt's version of 1930s and 1940s Limerick poverty (albeit superficially) and the contemporary problems of adversity that were affecting the Derby community in 2012. Thus, history provided an 'outer frame' that supported the 'inner frame' of the performance itself. The Derby musical demonstrated Bennett's analysis aptly, particularly the work of interpretation being done by the reader/spectator and how their understanding of an individual text is dependant upon a broader intertextual network. By making an overt statement about Derby poverty, the audience witnessed the shift in emphasis from preoccupation with the biography and intention of McCourt as author towards an interrogation of the frame of reference that the audience brought to a production. The performance exemplified how the perceived value of the text becomes the product of the shared interpretive strategies of the community which passes judgement upon it rather than qualities intrinsic to the text.

Of course, the playing out of the 'American Dream' in the Derby Theatre space exemplified Ian Bradley's contention that the most ubiquitous and dominant message embodied by the musical genre is, 'you've got to have a dream', derived from the well-known aphorisms of 'reaching the end of the rainbow'; 'climbing every mountain'; 'dreaming the impossible dream' or 'recalling that brief and long-lost moment that was Camelot.'<sup>31</sup> But the fact that the house lights stayed on during this song meant that the

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<sup>30</sup> Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, pp. 139-142.

<sup>31</sup> Ian Bradley, *You've Got To Have a Dream: The Message of the Musical* (London: SCM Press, 2004), pp. 1, 230-231.

singing of these sentiments in *Angela's Ashes* was intended to focus upon local engagement and local significance. There was an undoubted sense of pride on show, as later explained to me by Musical Director and Composer Adam Howell, in managing to secure a working-class, recently rescued venue in the middle of post-industrial Derby for this world premiere. In the programme, Howell pointed to the local importance of McCourt's story, which in this context was about 'overcoming all obstacles and surviving awful circumstances.'<sup>32</sup> For the audience in Derby, it did not matter that McCourt's text gives little insight into Limerick in the 1940s, because instead the production made firm connections with the contemporary issues of poverty and adversity facing not just the Irish but the broader Derby community. With this in mind, the cast made little effort at authenticity in the Irish accents, revealing quite clearly that these actors were from Derby. Indeed, when news of the production reached readers of *Irish American News*, reporter Gerry Molumby defined the accents as 'becom[ing] at times "stage oirish"', but this was to miss the point.<sup>33</sup> Some of the cast did not bother to do any accent at all other than their own, others attempted an Irish voice, whereas some opted for a kind of American pastiche. But in each case we could hear the distinct tones of Derbyshire. After I spoke with the Director, it became clear that this wasn't simply an oversight that had been missed in rehearsal. According to the official explanation at least, what the cast and producers of this show were trying to do was to demonstrate that the audience did not need to know anything about Ireland at all: what it needed to do was to see how the story related to what was happening around them in Derby. Here McCourt's words were intended to catalyse the audience in an English context, and to encourage members to seek change.

In 2012, at the time of this premiere, nearly a quarter of Derby's children were reported to be living in hardship. Shortly before the performance, Chris Williamson,

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<sup>32</sup>Adam Howell, Musical Director and Composer, statement in the Programme for *Angela's Ashes: A Musical*.

<sup>33</sup>Gerry Molumby, 'Angela's Ashes A Musical? It Works', in *Irish American News Online*, 10 November 2012 <[http://www.irishamericannews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3684:angelas-ashes-a-musical-it-works&catid=125:theater&Itemid=373](http://www.irishamericannews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3684:angelas-ashes-a-musical-it-works&catid=125:theater&Itemid=373)> [accessed 10 November 2012].

then Labour Member of Parliament for Derby North, declared of his constituency: 'Ministers are creating a new Dickensian era, with children living in poorer communities now far more likely to live in poverty than those who live in more affluent areas.'<sup>34</sup> Subsequently, in May 2012 the inaugural meeting of the City Council's Derby Child and Family Poverty Commission pledged to establish food banks and to protect the vulnerable by challenging the marketing, promotion and positioning of 'pay-day' lending companies. The Council expressed its intent to focus upon increasing the supply of affordable banking and credit facilities in the city.<sup>35</sup> In addition, some Catholic audience members (with the play having been heavily advertised in local Catholic churches) would have been aware that many of the Diocesan parishes extend financial aid to the "Refuge" Centre in Derby to sustain those suffering domestic abuse, as well as supporting the Catholic Children's Society.<sup>36</sup> These charitable acts draw a parallel with the McCourt family's reliance upon the St Vincent de Paul Society and the elementary system of public assistance known as the 'Dispensary'.

In Act 1, Scene 5 of the Derby production, the St Vincent de Paul episode in which Angela McCourt goes to beg for succour was one in which the audience was directly brought into the action. At this point in the musical the actors adapted McCourt's words into a parody of the challenging patter of a Gilbert and Sullivan-esque comic song, 'We Know Best', so that the colloquial simplicity of this repeated line became an adapted, Lawrentian counter-refrain of 'tha knows nowt.'<sup>37</sup> This derision was sung to drown out Angela McCourt's pleas and was accentuated by the deep baritone voice of the actor playing the St Vincent de Paul bureaucrat, Mr Quinlivan. The repetitive style of

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<sup>34</sup> See, 'Nearly a quarter of city children live in poverty', in *Derby Telegraph*, 12 January 2012 <<http://www.thisisderbyshire.co.uk/Nearly-quarter-city-children-live-poverty/story-14398827-detail/story.html>> [accessed 5 November 2012]. Children are classed as living in poverty if their parents receive out-of-work benefits or tax credits, or where the family's income is less than 60% of local average.

<sup>35</sup> See Derby City Council, Report of the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Item 16, 15 May 2013 <<https://cmis.derby.gov.uk/CMIS5/Document>> [29 July 2013].

Also see Child Health Profile for Derby, March 2013, compiled by Child and Maternal Health Observatory <<http://www.chimat.org.uk/resource/view.aspx?RID=152423>> [accessed 29 July 2013].

<sup>36</sup> See St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Burton Road Derby, local charity initiative <<http://www.stjosephsderby.org.uk/about-us/charities/>> [accessed 14 July 2013].

Also see St. Alban's statement on support for the Catholic Children's Society <<http://www.stalbansderby.org.uk/parish/finance/>> [accessed 14 July 2013].

<sup>37</sup> See, D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (London: Penguin Books, 1990[1960]), p. 183.

annunciation, the fast tempo, the rhythmic patterns and rapid succession of authoritative words, gave the onstage action a direct affiliation with Derbyshire speech rather than that of the Limerick underclass. For those spectators from the Irish diaspora, the scene may have represented how the lives of such Limerick inhabitants were dominated by hunger and disease in an era that was reliant upon the cold charity of what was still the Poor Law system in a 1940s Ireland, but for those who did not have such specialist knowledge, the style of delivery would be more likely to conjure up images of contemporary Derbyshire.

In this way, the young cast from Uncontained Arts was likely to have made a connection with young members of the audience who were being shown a parallel version of poverty elsewhere. Indeed, the Derbyshire Public Health Report 2012/2013 highlights that the current youth unemployment rate of 20% has had a 'profound impact' on health, education, aspirations and opportunities of the youth of the city. The findings show that the consequential depression sometimes leads to the tragedy of suicide, which says 'something about the level of mental distress in the community', and often marks the 'extreme end point of poor mental health' caused by contributory factors such as alcohol and drug misuse, unemployment, family/relationship breakdown and bereavement.<sup>38</sup> Some of the spectators of *Angela's Ashes* would have recalled the widely reported incident that happened during the period of the theatre's closure, of the seventeen-year-old Shaun Dykes who plunged to a very public death from the roof of the shopping centre in which Derby Theatre is housed. The young man was said to have had a history of depression, and was worried about homelessness after the recent end of the relationship with his boyfriend.<sup>39</sup> Hence there was a terrible connection in *Angela's Ashes: A Musical* between real life events and the Absolution

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<sup>38</sup> Derbyshire Public Health Report 2012/2013, pp. 23, 56.

<[http://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/images/Derbyshire%20health%20Report\\_tcm44-224110.pdf](http://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/images/Derbyshire%20health%20Report_tcm44-224110.pdf)> [accessed 22 November 2013].

<sup>39</sup> See Helen Pidd, 'Coroner blames youths who taunted boy before suicide leap', in *The Guardian*, 16 January 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/jan/16/youth-suicide-derby>> [accessed 23 November 2013]. Also see, BBC News report, 15 January 2009 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/derbyshire/7831166.stm>> [accessed 23 November 2013].

scene in Act 2 (the penultimate scene before the Finale) when the audience witnessed the acute mental distress of the actor playing the young McCourt. His torment was a result of parental alcoholism, poverty, serious illness, bereavement as well as the mental and physical abuse that he suffered at the hands of Laman Griffin and vindictive priests and schoolmasters.

Richard Dyer argues that the onstage musical creates utopian possibilities within a dystopic social reality because the things that we want deeply cannot 'be provid[ed] in our 'day-to-day lives.' As Dyer explains in his *idea* of Utopia, these notions of 'escape' and 'wish-fulfillment' displace the negative aspects of the real world such as poverty, parental alcoholism, repressive Catholicism and exploitive landlords. All these foes are eradicated in favour of the prospect of abundance and liberation, or something 'other than what can be imagined and maybe realised.'<sup>40</sup> However, in *Derby*, the 2012 McCourt musical pointed the audience to very real contemporary issues, and then asked them - particularly in the request for fundraising that was made on the way out of the theatre at the end - to take practical steps to help find solutions to pressing, contemporary issues in Derby. While the McCourt musical was the key motivator for selfless giving that evening, donations from audience members might have been influenced by personal experience of hardship as well as by the religious virtue of charity. Notwithstanding, the Uncontained Arts Company was able to donate to local causes to help alleviate the plight of those facing diverse forms of disadvantage in the Derby area.

### **'Irishness' Decontextualised on Film**

Like its musical counterpart, Alan Parker's cinematic version of *Angela's Ashes* released by Paramount Pictures in 1999 undergoes a textual metamorphosis into what Julie Sanders defines as 'a wholly new cultural product and domain.'<sup>41</sup> Yet, the film has none

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<sup>40</sup> Dyer, 'Entertainment and Utopia', in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. by Rick Altman (London: Routledge, 1981), 175-189 (p. 177).

<sup>41</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, pp. 18-19, 26.



of the musical's regional sense of emplacement. Parker actually evades any localising particularities that might enable a political critique of any particular nation or governmental regime to be constructed. Instead, he draws upon globalised and decontextualised notions of 'Irishness' through a clichéd representation of life in 1930s and 1940s Limerick, complete with Stage Irish characters and stock situations. Moreover, a number of critics identified that the film had incorporated a range of melodramatic elements that hostile commentators found predictable.<sup>42</sup> For example, Philip French argues in *The Guardian*: 'The movie establishes its central image at the outset - incessant rain pouring on a back alley — [and] we are told a Dickensian tale of squalor, guilt, neglect and humiliation.'<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, Peter Bradshaw argues that although Parker dispenses with the 'beer-commercial soft focus and the clichés of flute and fiddle', he most likely exaggerated the severity of McCourt's poverty for dramatic effect.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, Parker's adaptation was not simply a case of filmic 'Oirishness': the filmmakers were drawing on a melodramatic tradition that had been encoded within McCourt's writing from the beginning.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the gloomy opening lines of *Angela's Ashes* can be heard in a voice-over at the start of the film. Yet there is a dark humour in McCourt's hyperbolic overstatement 'the happy childhood is hardly worth your while' since Ireland is not a famine-ravaged part of sub-Saharan Africa, for example. However, we shall see in Chapter 4 that this device is a key component of Dion Boucicault and Seán O'Casey's writing, and illustrates McCourt's awareness of the

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<sup>42</sup> See Todd McCarthy, 'Angela's Ashes', in *Variety*, 12 December 1999  
<<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117759853?refcatid=31&printerfriendly=true>> [accessed 10 April, 2012]. McCarthy said: '[*Angela's Ashes*] succeeds in making manifest the world of crushing poverty, petty prejudices and death. Parker [...] gives a strong sense of a place physically defined by heavy gray skies, acrid smoke and water dripping, pouring and flooding everywhere.'

<sup>43</sup> Philip French, 'From Bleak House to Great Expectations', in *The Guardian*, 16 January 2000  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2000/jan/16/philipfrench>> [accessed 31 January 2013].

<sup>44</sup> Peter Bradshaw, 'It's Grim Out West', in *The Guardian*, 14 January 2000  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2000/jan/14/1>> [accessed 31 January 2013].

<sup>45</sup> 'Oirishness' is a term used by Luke Gibbons in 'Romanticism, Realism and Irish Cinema', in *Cinema and Ireland*, ed. by Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill (Dublin: Routledge, 1987), 194-257 (p. 196).

creative grist that is inherent in what Thomas Elsaesser has called the 'family melodrama', through *mise-en-scène*, music and performance.<sup>46</sup>

Parker claims to have enquired about purchasing the film rights after reading the manuscript of *Angela's Ashes* before its publication.<sup>47</sup> He told *The Guardian* that financial backing from American studios was assured because *Angela's Ashes* had won the Pulitzer Prize, become 'a publishing phenomenon everywhere around the world' and the number one bestseller in the *New York Times* list.<sup>48</sup> This illustrates Simone Murray's contention that film-makers continue to avail themselves avidly of literary fiction's associations with cultural prestige brought about by literary awards, and of course, the accompanying popularity and commercial success.<sup>49</sup> It is unsurprising then that McCourt's commercial and critical success promoted *Angela's Ashes* to Parker as a prime source for screen adaptation in the Celtic-Tiger era. As Martin McLoone notes, *Angela's Ashes* premiered in a period when the perception of a changing Ireland 'was the dominant zeitgeist', thereby identifying the tensions in screening a film about individual and community based memories of abject poverty at a time when Ireland had entered a period of unprecedented economic growth that progressed at a rate of 9.4% between 1995 and 2000.<sup>50</sup> This financial expansion allowed Ireland to boast full employment, property prices soared, and many emigrants returned to Ireland to live. Moreover, immigration began to exceed emigration by a wide margin. Ireland's new-found affluence was set against the trans-national appeal of the Irish emigration story

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<sup>46</sup>Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', in *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1972), pp. 43-69.

<sup>47</sup> Parker quoted by Susan Tetlow Harrington in 'Angela's Ashes', in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 29:1, (2001), 58-61 (p. 58).

<sup>48</sup> *The Guardian* interview with Alan Parker for the British Film Industry, 'Angela's Ashes: The manuscript/ The casting/ The film', in *The Guardian*, 7 January 2000  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2000/jan/07/guardianinterviewsatbfisouthbank1>> [accessed 17 December 2012].

<sup>49</sup> Simone Murray, *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 128.

<sup>50</sup> Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), p. 180.

Also see Paedar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin, eds., *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto, 2002), p. 17. The first recorded use of the expression "Celtic Tiger" was by Kevin Gardiner of Morgan Stanley, London to draw a comparison between Ireland's growth and the Asian "tiger" economies.

that is played out through *Angela's Ashes*, illustrating not only the appeal of such a generic scenario to Parker but also demonstrating Murray's point about the ease with which McCourt's narrative transferred easily to the screen at least in part because of the way that the book's own commercial success appeared to mirror the Irish economic 'miracle'.<sup>51</sup>

Although Parker had to find suitable locations to recreate the appalling poverty and squalor of McCourt's text, it mattered little where the scenes were filmed because Parker was aware of the inherent appeal of the shameless sentimentality and the images of suffering in *Angela's Ashes* to a global audience outside of Ireland; most notably an American one, as indicated by box office data. According to Rentrak, the multiscreen reporting and analytical company, the final United Kingdom and Ireland gross box office figure for *Angela's Ashes* was £7,753,488. Of that £1,769,999 was from the Republic of Ireland and £436,317 from Northern Ireland.<sup>52</sup> Such takings are dwarfed by the figures, in the more comprehensive data, showing that the gross United States box office figure was £8,098,546 (\$13,038,660). On the opening weekend the United States box office figure was £33,928 (\$54,628) distributed to 325 screens as opposed to the UK/Irish figure of £1,351, distributed to just 6 screens.<sup>53</sup> When these figures are converted against the dollar/British pound exchange rate of 2000, the overall box office percentage for Ireland was a somewhat insignificant 14%.

These statistics are perhaps unsurprising for a film distributed and financed by American studios, yet Parker's concentration on the melodramatic undertones of the source text is countered with the story of the expatriate Irishman in New York to bolster a notion of the 'American Dream'. Of course, the potential progress and

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<sup>51</sup> Murray, *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation*, p. 187.

<sup>52</sup> Personal email from David Thurston, General Manager of Rentrak, 26 November 2012.

<sup>53</sup> For a comprehensive account see, Internet Movie Database, Box Office figures for *Angela's Ashes* <[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0145653/business?ref\\_=tt\\_dt\\_bus](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0145653/business?ref_=tt_dt_bus)> [accessed 3 May 2012].

Also see, Box Office Data for *Angela's Ashes* in the US at <<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/1999/ANGAS.php>> [accessed 3 May 2013].

Lumiere, Data Base on admissions figures for films released in Europe, National Markets of European Union and the US (*Angela's Ashes*) <[http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/film\\_info/?id=15219](http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/film_info/?id=15219)> [accessed 3 May 2013].

enlightenment offered by the neo-imperial hegemonic power was always a key driver of McCourt's original plot. The notion that a family should actually leave the 'Promised Land' to return to Ireland is superseded by McCourt's survival instinct culminating in a desire for 're-birth' in America. In fact, American journalist, Andrew O'Hehir, defines *Angela's Ashes* as a 'fable testifying to the redemptive powers of two things turn-of-the-century Americans desperately want to believe in: storytelling and America itself. [...] It plays into Irish-Americans' hazy, half-imaginary notions of their tragic origins.'<sup>54</sup> Thus, Parker's awareness of the unabashed mythology of misery in *Angela's Ashes* might ensure that his American audience find a vindication of their own ancestors' decision to leave the 'Old World'. In fact, such images of deprivation have the potential to become part of what Alison Landsberg calls a 'personal archive of experience.' Landsberg contends that film is a 'particularly powerful conduit' for the generation of empathy. Her term 'prosthetic' memory is a way of understanding how cinema enables the audience to experience as memories what they did not themselves live.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Parker's adaptation of *Angela's Ashes* re-confirms the myth of Irish immigration as a success story by narrating why the Irish left their homeland and survived in the face of adversity.

Nevertheless, the economic resurgence of 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland made it difficult to find locations shabby enough to re-present McCourt's recollection of the poverty that was endemic in the slums of 1930s and 1940s Limerick. *Reel Streets* have compiled eighty-five filming location stills from *Angela's Ashes*, most of which are marked 'unidentified, unknown or unconfirmed' except for a recognisable establishing shot of the River Shannon and The Crescent, encapsulating what McCourt's father names 'a grey place with a river that kills' (p.238). In fact what is assumed to be Windmill Street, Limerick is represented in Parker's particularly gloomy aesthetic by Farren Street, Cork, with

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<sup>54</sup>Andrew O'Hehir, 'America the Brutal', in *Salon*, 31 August 1999 <<http://www.salon.com/1999/08/31/tis/>> [accessed 9 December 2013]. *Salon* is a news aggregation website that is part of *Salon Media Group*. It focuses upon US politics current affairs and on reviews and articles about music, books and films.

<sup>55</sup>Alison Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an age of Mass Culture', in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. by Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 144-161 (pp. 148-149).

other scenes filmed in Wicklow.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, as the centrepiece of the film Roden Lane was recreated on a piece of waste ground that Parker claims to have found in the 'middle of Dublin.'<sup>57</sup> The locations were deliberately obscured, but that was not of any real significance because Parker's intention was to mythologize McCourt's self-affirming male quest to return to New York, preparing 'Irishness' for global consumption in the same way as McCourt himself does by selling a cleverly constructed stereotypical image of Irish misery. As a consequence, several commentators have levelled similar accusations about Parker's adaptation as those levelled at McCourt's text by Foster; essentially that Parker has embellished and exaggerated the re-creation of the 'miserable Irish Catholic childhood' that McCourt claims to have suffered.

### **A Critical Response to Parker**

After watching Parker's film, the Irish writer and broadcaster Fergal Keane commented: 'Parker went so far over the top that I ended up feeling cheated. The film led us on a rainy dance through every Irish cliché.'<sup>58</sup> Keane's opinion highlights how Parker's screenplay has resulted in the loss of McCourt's personal perspective through a diminished depth of characterisation and a reduced emotional impact. Parker's intention of recreating accurately the destitution, poverty and damp ambience of McCourt's 1930s Limerick has meant that the character's subjectivity is secondary. Writing in a similar vein, Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* said: 'Parker's 'quaintly romantic view of deprivation [places] emphasis on aesthetic niceties, in a film whose tidily controlled palette keeps any sense of real suffering at bay [to invite] empathy from a comfy distance.'<sup>59</sup> According to this reading, Parker's work prevents us from

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<sup>56</sup> John and Brian Tunstall, *et al*, *Reel Streets*, film locations of *Angela's Ashes* <[http://www.reelstreets.com/index.php?option=com\\_films&task=view&id=1137&film\\_ref=x\\_the\\_unknown&limitstart=>](http://www.reelstreets.com/index.php?option=com_films&task=view&id=1137&film_ref=x_the_unknown&limitstart=>) [accessed 27 November 2013].

<sup>57</sup> British Film Industry, interview with Alan Parker, 'Angela's Ashes: The manuscript/ the casting/the film', in *The Guardian*, 7 January 2000.

<sup>58</sup> Fergal Keane quoted in Jackie McGlone, 'Kiss and tell with a sucker punch', in *Scotsman on Sunday*, 26 October 2003 <<http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/features/kiss-and-tell-with-a-sucker-punch-1-1295200>> [accessed 27 December 2012].

<sup>59</sup> Janet Maslin, 'A New Gloss on Poverty in Ireland', in *The New York Times*, 24 December 1999 <<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B04E0D71539F937A15751C1A96F958260&scp=1&sq=an>

engaging in any wider societal critique. After watching a Christmas pantomime, we may feel sorry for Cinderella's initially impoverished circumstances and happy at her escape, but we can scarcely map her earlier circumstances onto any particular real-life location, and hence Cinderella helps us in no way to understand or to resist the very real poverty that exists outside the theatre. A very similar criticism can be levelled at Parker's version of *Angela's Ashes*.

Martin McLoone argues that there is an incongruity between Parker's 'lush visuals' and the ironic anger of the film's opening voice-over narration. McLoone claims that a 'missing voice' disables the film crucially by 'render[ing] impotent' the ironic tone of the written text. He challenges the point of Parker's re-working if it does not leave the audience with a 'leavening focus for anger' or resistance to oppression because the narrative voice cannot be visualised effectively.<sup>60</sup> What is more, McLoone insists that Parker's 'pictorial bluntness' offers neither a resonance with contemporary Ireland from the perspective of how the past is remembered from the present, nor evinces McCourt's experience in the same way. Other negative responses were reported at the Limerick premiere. For example, Councillor Michael O'Kelly, Chairman of Limerick City Council, told the *Irish Times* that the film was an exaggeration and he disagreed in particular with the depiction of the St Vincent de Paul Society.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, older Limerick residents like Rita McClosky said that McCourt exaggerated the poverty of the 1930s and 1940s Limerick, defining the details of the film as inaccurate and insulting.<sup>62</sup> Gerry Hannan, a DJ on Limerick 95FM, and one of McCourt's most vociferous critics, took particular exception to McCourt's depiction of Limerick. According to Carlo Gébler of *The Guardian*, following the release of *Angela's Ashes* in the cinema, Hannan went

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gela's%20ashes%20review%20of%20film%20adaptation&st=cse> [accessed 10 April 2012 and 1 May 2013].

<sup>60</sup> McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*, p. 215.

<sup>61</sup> Éibhir Mulqueen, 'Mccourt's City as Divided on the Film as the Book', in *Irish Times*, 13 January 2000, p. 3.

Also see Peter Bradshaw, 'It's Grim Out West', in *The Guardian*, 14 January 2000

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2000/jan/14/1>> [accessed 31 January 2013]. Bradshaw argues that although Parker dispenses with the 'beer-commercial soft focus and the clichés of flute and fiddle', both he and McCourt most likely exaggerated the 'notional severity of poverty for dramatic effect.'

<sup>62</sup> Tara Mack, 'Raking Over the Ashes' in *The Guardian*, 22 January 2000,

<<http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2000/jan/22/limerick.ireland>> [accessed 24 November 2013].

head-to-head with McCourt on Ireland's flagship chat show *The Late Late Show*.<sup>63</sup> These viewpoints articulate that 'Limerick' became a free-floating signifier, upon which Parker could load a series of pejorative connotations, becoming dislocated from the reality of the geographical location it purportedly described.

In a sophisticated analysis of contemporary Irish culture, Joe Cleary has expressed his reservations about the creative use of the historical time period that Parker deploys. Cleary argues that 'the obsessive return to these decades' as an indication of traumatic history, simultaneously acts as a 'negative validation of the present' that signifies the attainments of Irish modernisation in both the economic and wider socio-political spheres.<sup>64</sup> Elsewhere, Cleary has said that imaging the past as inert and repressive affirms the new social formation of 1990s Irish society.<sup>65</sup> In this sense, cultural representations of Ireland's depleted past permit present-day detachment from and complacency about the nation's history, which is the equivalent of expressing relief at having a 'lucky escape' from it all.<sup>66</sup> If Parker's film exposes some of the way that Ireland was marketed internationally in a somewhat cynical way at the height of the 'Celtic Tiger' era, a more intelligent film may have critiqued the economic balloon that was about to pop. After all, the film said little about Ireland and more about global tastes in film sentimentality and archaic representations of 'Irishness' such as Parker's depiction of McCourt's father, juxtaposed with the maxims used by him alongside those uttered by McCourt's Uncle Pa Keating and grandmother. Again, by resorting to old stereotypes, Parker demonstrates Merriman's aforementioned contention that theatrical depictions of Ireland have been those of a 'benighted dystopia', composed of

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<sup>63</sup> Gébler, 'Author whose first and best-known book was his extraordinary memoir *Angela's Ashes*', in *The Guardian*, 20 July 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jul/20/frank-mccourt-obituary>> [accessed 5 January 2014].

Also see, 'The Late Late Show: Gerard Hannan versus Frank McCourt' <[http://www.scoopweb.com/Frank\\_McCourt](http://www.scoopweb.com/Frank_McCourt)> [accessed 1 August 2010].

<sup>64</sup> Joe Cleary, 'Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture', in *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics 1949–1999*, ed. by Ray Ryan (London: Macmillan, 2000), 105-109 (pp. 107-108).

<sup>65</sup> Cleary, 'Towards a Materialist-Formalist History of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature', in *boundary 2*, 3: 1 (2004), 207-241 (p. 231).

<sup>66</sup> Cleary, 'Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture', p. 108.

restaged caricatures of 'over-determined Irishry' from a repository of gross stereotypical depictions, particularly in the areas of speech.<sup>67</sup>

### **The 'Begorrah Horror' of the Stage Irish Character<sup>68</sup>**

Declan Kiberd begins his defining study *Inventing Ireland* by pointing to the rudimentary portrait of the stage Irishman that is found in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. According to Kiberd, Shakespeare's character of the Irish Captain Macmorris shows 'those traits of garrulity, pugnacity and a rather unfocused ethnic pride which would later signalize the stage Irishman.'<sup>69</sup> For Kiberd, who takes his models from postcolonial criticism and the orientalist models of Edward Said, such stereotypes were created in England for political effect: 'the makers of Crown policy in Ireland made ever more strenuous attempts to define an English national character, and a countervailing Irish one.'<sup>70</sup> When viewed through this interpretive optic, the fact that Parker's film so readily recycled Irish stereotypes in the era of the apparent triumph of neo-liberal capitalism and globalised economics, is a cause for concern, and may reveal the persistence of old imperialist stereotypes about Ireland and the Irish in an era that is no longer dominated by the British Empire itself.

Lionel Pilkington draws on the spectator's familiarity with the figure of the stage Irishman to suggest that the idea of being Irish means playing a part in an attempt to demonstrate Ireland's renowned Celtic Tiger ability to 'conform to what others want, [...] to adjust, adapt and remake itself according to the volatile demands of fast-track global capitalism.'<sup>71</sup> One of the most cogent signs of stage Irishry is what Pilkington calls 'the brogue, a heavy Irish accent that is so obviously emphatic – so deviant and lucid in relation to the norms of English pronunciation and therefore so potentially

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<sup>67</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, pp. 195, 209, 212.

<sup>68</sup> 'Begorrah horror is a term used by Ronald Bergan in 'Why Hollywood should abolish the ministry of silly accents', in *The Guardian*, 19 January 2010

< <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2010/jan/19/foreign-accents-film> > [accessed 26 March 2013].

<sup>69</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 13.

<sup>70</sup> Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre and Ireland* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 9.



replete with solecisms — that it appears to be something performed.<sup>72</sup> As I have already mentioned, in the Derby Theatre musical adaptation of *Angela's Ashes* there was a self-conscious playing with notions of the authentic. At no time could anyone in the Derby audience have believed that they were listening to Irish people, but instead the stage accents were a strange hybrid of mostly Derby speech, but with some Americanisms, and some Irish-isms in order to make sense of particular references in the script. Such a process reminded audiences self-consciously of the necessary process of mediation and fictionalising that is inherent in any theatre production: the performers were, in effect, revealing the process of theatrical construction and mediation at the same time that they were performing, in a manner that might recall the way that Brecht or Boal have also sought to highlight and politicise those processes through performance.<sup>73</sup> But in Parker's film version, something quite different happened. All of the actors adopted a hybridised Irish accent that derived from no particular place. McCourt himself expressed regret that although Liam Neeson had 'the right accent' to play his father, a 'problem with money' had prevented this.<sup>74</sup> One correspondent wrote to the *Irish Times* to complain:

Sir, — I don't wish to appear regionalistic, but does anyone find it odd that, despite the setting of Alan Parker's film *Angela's Ashes*, there is hardly a Limerick accent to be heard. A slight quibble perhaps, but can you imagine a Scorsese gangster film set in New York in which the protagonist speaks with a pronounced Texas drawl? Oh well, not to worry, the Yanks won't notice anyway! Yours, etc. J. G. Byrne, Crescent Villas, Limerick.<sup>75</sup>

This point was articulated succinctly at the Limerick premiere when local resident, Brian McNamara remarked to *The Irish Times* that there were 'not enough local accents

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<sup>72</sup> Pilkington, *Theatre and Ireland*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>73</sup> See Augusto Boal, *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998). Boal highlights 'populist' theatre's potential to bring about social and political change. Also see, Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). Brechtian theatre illustrates the potential that theatre has to instigate conflict and disrupt the idea of the passive audience and incite a self-reflective critique

<sup>74</sup> McCourt in conversation with Terence Patrick Winch, 'The Writing Life', 2009 (exact date unknown) <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTyPRnoKe\\_A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTyPRnoKe_A)> [accessed 22 February 2013].

Also see <<http://terencewinch.com/>> [accessed 22 February 2013].

Also see, Michael Fleming 'Neeson, Watson in talks for 'Ashes'', in *Variety*, 22 June 1998 <<http://variety.com/1998/film/news/neeson-watson-in-talks-for-ashes-1117477754/>> [accessed 2 May 2013].

<sup>75</sup> Shane Walshe, *Irish English as Represented in Film* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang Inc., 2009), p. 1.

to be heard. They were all Cork or Dublin.<sup>76</sup> McNamara's point also serves to underscore the argument that it mattered little where Parker chose to film *Angela's Ashes* or which 'type' of Irish dialect/accent to use, since the stock characters and situations had little to do with any particular location, either in Ireland or anywhere else. If, as the box office figures reveal, the bulk of the audience for the film was to be found in the U.S.A., then there was a very real danger of producing a falsity that 'the Yanks won't notice'.

Vincent Cheng's checklist of 'authenticity' arbitrates aptly when considering what an Irish accent or dialect might sound like. Cheng deems that our preconceptions include Gaelic inflections and influences of the peasant West and the Connemara hills, areas of Ireland that are commonly associated with the notion of an idyllic Ireland.<sup>77</sup> This suggests that the urban accent and dialect of Limerick and Dublin, for example, must be inauthentic and not really Irish. In fact, Fintan O'Toole argues that such a notion was reinforced by Willie Fay, who as director of the Abbey Theatre, vowed to 'beat the Dublin accents' out of his players, forcing them 'to learn to talk like peasants.'<sup>78</sup> To assist the audience's perception of the typical phonological features of Irish English as used in 1930s Limerick, McCourt employs regularly a non-standard use of the definite article: 'And the Shakespeare. I love the Shakespeare' and '[...] promise to die for Ireland and I'll give the two of you the Friday Penny' (pp.319,123). However, an actor's attempt at an accurate Limerick dialect can never be anything more than a copy. Their accented performances and phonetic ability can only be in terms of how typical the utterances are to the individual listener or what the listener perceives to be Irish English. As Sarah Rubidge argues, 'authenticity is not a property of, but

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<sup>76</sup> Mulqueen, 'Mccourt's City as divided on the film as the book', in *The Irish Times*, 13 January 2000, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Vincent J. Cheng, *Inauthentic. The Anxiety over Culture and Identity* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 29.

<sup>78</sup> Fintan O'Toole, 'Going West: The Country versus the City in Irish Writing', in *The Crane Bag* 9 (2), (1985), 111-116 (p. 112).

something to ascribe to a performance.<sup>79</sup> Rubidge is contending that if the audience believes Irish English to sound in a certain way and to consist of expressions heard on the stage and screen like "Top o' the mornin'" and "Begorrah", then it will be deemed authentic by the listener. Writing in the same vein, Sarah Kozloff argues that in narrative films dialogue may:

strive mightily to imitate natural conversation. But it is always an imitation. It has been scripted, written and re-written, censored and polished, rehearsed and performed. Even when lines are improvised [...] they have been spoken by impersonators, judged, approved and allowed to remain.<sup>80</sup>

This use of accent is of concern not because of its lack of connection with reality, but because it serves to establish a form of impoverished 'Irishness' as the generic other, against which the triumph of American capitalism can be contrasted. A form of 'Irishness' can, in the film, be transcended through assimilation into the dominant American economic and cultural model. Indeed, Nicholas Grene has argued that *Angela's Ashes* demonstrates 'black pastoral'; a mode that he believes satirises or subverts the customary motifs of the mother, the child growing up and the emigrant experience. According to Grene, these tropes traditionally 'connect the space of pastoral with the world the audience actually inhabits' depicting an idealised place of origin. By way of contrast, black pastoral inverts the norm of pastoral by representing a brutally unidyllic Ireland of the past', while mocking the very desire to go back to the origin.<sup>81</sup>

Although Parker's representation of McCourt's father embodies Kiberd's description of the fundamental audible and visible signs of the 'stage Irish' figure, Parker emphasises the negative traits. McCourt's father's playing out of the patriot game through a drunken rendition of nationalistic songs, exposes itself as merely a set of alcohol-

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<sup>79</sup>Sarah Rubidge, 'Does Authenticity Matter? The Case For and Against Authenticity in the Performing Arts', in *Analysing Performance: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Patrick Campbell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 219-233 (p. 219).

<sup>80</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), p. 18.

<sup>81</sup> Grene, 'Black Pastoral: 1990s Images Of Ireland', in *Litteraria Pragensia*, No. 20, Vol. 10 (2000), pp. 67-75 (p. 69).

infused and irrelevant cultural expressions so that the serious political issues surrounding Irish Republicanism are avoided. Despite Sheldon Harnick's contention that an audience is generally receptive to important life-lessons that are being imparted through performance, Parker defangs any trace of militant nationalism to make the film palatable for an international audience.<sup>82</sup> Harnick is upholding the Brechtian idea that value systems can be identified and promoted through performance along with suggestions that the lessons they project may be circulated, both locally and globally. However, a more telling critique would have highlighted the failure of the postcolonial Irish state to care for its citizens. In that regard, the nation's political interests were redefined to those that shared a confining nationalist and religious position, based effectively on a converse of English rule yet strangely mimicking it. Moreover, the stunting effects of an Irish Catholic nationalism that was developed by adherence to a pure ideal that rejected sexual, religious and cultural difference was disabling to an Irish nation. By obscuring a particular Irish locale and the accompanying dialect that would identify any particular Irish location, Parker's film merely recycles the crude stereotypes that could be understood internationally without any knowledge of such a dictatorial rule.

### ***Angela's Ashes: A Cultural Product***

The success of McCourt's writing coincided with a remarkable surge of interest in the allusions, images and representations of 'Irishness' that appealed to a global market. Parker's subsequent screenplay connected with other globalised Irish products during a cultural Renaissance, which broadly followed in the wake of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* in 1990, and which I highlighted in my introductory chapter. However, as an enterprise model, McCourt's writing can be directly located within the Irish cultural terrain of *Riverdance*, the other notable, immensely popular Irish cultural product of

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<sup>82</sup> Sheldon Harnick, Foreword, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2003), p. ix.

the late twentieth century.<sup>83</sup> Originally, *Riverdance* was a seven-minute interval entertainment act during the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest at the Point Theatre, Dublin, watched by an estimated thirty million viewers. The full show that followed had its American premiere in New York's Radio City Music Hall in March 1996, the same year that *Angela's Ashes* was published. Like *Angela's Ashes*, *Riverdance* packaged 'Irishness' by retelling and reselling concepts of the past, becoming something of an Institution in this period of affluence, providing models for how an Irish-themed theatrical 'product' might be received globally. They were catalysts for the narrative of 'new' Ireland, demonstrating what G. Honor Fagan has termed 'local cultural keys turning global locks.'<sup>84</sup>

Debbie also melds *Angela's Ashes* with *Riverdance*, drawing attention to their status as enormously successful 'products' of the 1990s that were part of an imaginative moment. As Ging argues, both illustrate aptly that 'the celluloid stories' that Ireland told itself and others had become increasingly universal, being sufficient markers of 'Irishness' to satisfy both domestic and foreign audiences.<sup>85</sup> Parker's recreation of the episode in which McCourt's father tells him it is time to learn the dances of his ancestors, makes an implicit comparison with *Riverdance* in the way that it played against familiar motifs of 'Irishness'. Aoife McGrath singles out *Riverdance* to scrutinise the show's response to some of the most critical and complex socio-political and cultural issues in Ireland. Namely, the ability to appeal to those members of the Irish diaspora who are eager to connect with a mythic past, yet with a simultaneous desire for modern Irish culture. McGrath's reading of the show is affected by its coincidence with the arrival of the 'Celtic Tiger' and the embodiment of Ireland's new-found 'fiscal confidence and national pride', combined with a re-imagining of ostensible hermetic

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<sup>83</sup>*Riverdance*, directed by John McColgan, produced by Moya Doherty, The Point Theatre, Dublin, 30 April 1994.

<sup>84</sup>G. Honor Fagan, 'Globalized Ireland, or, Contemporary Transformations of National Identity?' in *The End of Irish History, Critical Approaches to the Celtic Tiger*, ed. by Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 117.

<sup>85</sup>Debbie Ging, 'Screening the Green: Cinema under the Celtic Tiger', in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, ed. by Peadar Kirby *et al* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 177-195 (p. 193).

narratives of oppression and restrictive definitions of 'Irish' corporeality.<sup>86</sup> However, according to McGrath, the 'exhilarating' finale in which a 'chorus line' of twenty-five 'perfectly synchronised' Irish step dancers are no longer performing a dance of 'exclusionary nationalism', but a Busby Berkley style of synchronisation that projects Ireland's ability to be economically 'in step' with the global market, to actually corporealise the 'national project of modernisation.'<sup>87</sup> Writing in the same vein Aoife Monks contends that the style of this finale produced a modernist shock of the new in Irish popular culture; a mode of 'tourist or souvenir performance' that might embody the "Comely Maidens" evoked by Éamon de Valera in 1943 that have been transformed into a commodity 'sold around the world.'<sup>88</sup>

In the 'Irish Dance' scene in Parker's film the young Frankie McCourt rejects Irish dancing and expresses a longing to dance like Fred Astaire in contrast to the prowess of Irish dancing champion, Cyril Benson. McCourt obeys reluctantly Mrs O'Connor's order to 'stand in line [...], straighten your back, hands by your sides, look ahead, don't look down, move your feet, [...] and stop that frowning, Frankie McCourt, or you'll have a puss on you like a pound of tripe, dance Frankie, dance, pick up your feet for the love o' Jesus.' At this point McCourt is showing how 'Irishness' is made unfashionable and unattractive by Mrs O'Connor's promotion of it. Nevertheless, Parker's audience might have joined those who since the 1990s contrasted McCourt's lack of rhythmic movement with the moment of Michael Flatley's flying entrance onto the *Riverdance* stage in a billowing white shirt with arms outstretched, witnessing that the mould of rigid Irish step dancing was broken. Similarly, the subtle sexuality within Jean Butler's sensuous gliding movements was set against Flatley's flamboyant exhibitionism to challenge directly the alleged purity of the tradition. Ironically, by foregrounding Cyril Benson's prowess, Parker brings Irish dancing back to the tradition that Flatley disregards. In accord, Frankie McCourt's rejection of Irish dancing serves as a reminder

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<sup>86</sup> Aoife McGrath, *Dance Theatre in Ireland* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 6-7.

<sup>87</sup> I McGrath, *Dance Theatre in Ireland*, pp. 6-7, 114.

<sup>88</sup> Aoife Monks, 'Comely Maidens and Celtic Tigers: *Riverdance* and Global Performance', *Goldsmiths Performance Research Pamphlets*, No. 1 (London: Goldsmiths University of London, 2007), pp. 3,5.

of the social modernisation and cultural pluralism of modern Ireland. When viewed from Cleary and Merriman's perspective, Angela's *Ashes* and *Riverdance* can be seen as cultural products of the 'Celtic Tiger' period that have left an indelible stamp by becoming an enduring symbol of the commodified image of 'Irishness' in that era. They exemplify how representations of the past are an integral element of how Ireland is imagined and framed.

The dramatic performances that have taken inspiration from McCourt's work have not necessarily shared a common aesthetic or political approach. Although this chapter has focussed on two high-profile adaptations, McCourt's work has also generated new revisions and interpretations more widely. For example, in April 2008 McCourt was seated amongst the audience to watch his pedagogical performance from *Teacher Man* re-presented by Irish-American actor, Michael McDonagle.<sup>89</sup> In a telephone conversation with me from New York in 2010, David Kener, the Director of American Place Theatre, recalled McCourt's delighted reaction to this one-man play adapted by Wynn Handman. Kener said that the performance had reiterated to McCourt that, as a teacher, he had learned everything in the classroom.<sup>90</sup> Elsewhere, a 2012 musical theatre version of *Angela's Ashes* (*Seitsemännien portaan enkeli*) was given by Hämeenlinnan Teatteri Company in Hämeenlinna, Finland. Unlike Derby Theatre's later show, the Finnish performance boasted of its Irish authenticity, claiming that it utilised 'typically Celtic instruments' such as 'mandolins, Irish bouzouki [and] Irish harp.'<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, John Williams has conducted the score of the film version of *Angela's*

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<sup>89</sup> See American Palace Theatre's video clip of *Teacher Man*

<[http://nantucket.plumtv.com/videos/teacher\\_man](http://nantucket.plumtv.com/videos/teacher_man)> [accessed 30 January 2009].

The show was re-performed in October 2009 as a tribute to McCourt by the University of Albany's Performing Arts Center in conjunction with the New York State Writers Institute.

<[http://www.americanplacetheatre.org/stage/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=blogcategory&id=0&Itemid=179](http://www.americanplacetheatre.org/stage/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=0&Itemid=179)> [accessed 17 March 2010].

<sup>90</sup> Personal emails from David Kener, the Executive Director of The American Palace Theatre, 23 March 2010 and 3 May 2010.

Telephone conversation with David Kener from New York, 5 May 2010 at 4.30 p.m. GMT.

<sup>91</sup> Ruxandra Balboa -Pöysti, *Angela's Ashes – Seitsemännien portaan enkeli*, directed by Hannu Matti Tyhtilä, at Hämeenlinnan Teatteri, Finland, March 2012, in *Art Hotspots* <<http://arthotspots.wordpress.com/2012/03/08/angelas-ashes-seitsemannen-portaan-enkeli/>> [accessed 4 December 2012].

See Trailer of *Seitsemännien portaan enkeli* at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wb5vqurikKg>> [accessed 4 December 2012].

*Ashes* at numerous concerts, and the Derby Theatre group performed *Angela's Ashes: A Musical* at Limerick's Lime Tree Theatre from 17-20 July 2013 as part of The Gathering 2013 and to commemorate the fourth anniversary of McCourt's death.<sup>92</sup>

The contrasting styles of these theatrical performances indicate that McCourt's rich work retains its capacity to continue inspiring further creative work, even if some of that creative work may not necessarily be flattering to the writer. After all, in 1999 the *New Republic* printed Vint Lawrence's caricature, 'The Brothers McCourt', which poked fun at the mercenary nature of the McCourt enterprise by depicting a doleful Frank riding backwards on a cow with shamrock markings while the smiling Malachy McCourt milks the cow.<sup>93</sup> In 2000 the *Irish Times* published Kevin Myers's *Cyril's Cinders*, a parody of *Angela's Ashes*, part of which reads:

What do I remember about my childhood? The same, I guess, as any Irish adult remembers about that time in their lives. Alcoholism, of course [...] to hide the pain of Irishness, the pain of life, the pain of existence on an island where every mother is an Irish mother [...] and every mother has a child as miserable as I was.<sup>94</sup>

But as these two contrasting examples show, subsequent dramatic performances of McCourt's work could be used for very different aesthetic and political effects in order to challenge or confirm, ideas of 'Irishness'.

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<sup>92</sup> John Williams and Frank McCourt, live recital of the music from, *Angela's Ashes*, performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, at Boston Symphony Hall, 5 June 2000  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPw2pcm1krc>> and  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hb9ORua4F14>> [accessed 21 November 2012].  
See Dyer, 'Williams Reflects on *Angela's Ashes*, Maestro Chooses a 'Universal Approach' to an Irish Story', in *The Boston Globe*, 28 January 2000, D15.

Also see, John Williams and Frank McCourt, recording of the music from *Angela's Ashes*, at the Boston Pops Anniversary Concert, Koussevitzky Music Shed, Tanglewood, 5 August 2000  
<<http://www.bso.org/Merchandise/Detail/44877>> [accessed 21 November 2012].  
*Angela's Ashes: A Musical*, an uncontained Arts and Theatre Works Production, adapted by Paul Hurt, directed by Yvonne Hart, music and lyrics by Adam Howell, performed at The Lime Tree Theatre, Limerick, 17-20 July 2013.

<sup>93</sup> Vint Lawrence, 'The Brothers McCourt', illustration for R. F. Foster's article 'Tisn't: The million-dollar blarney of the McCourts', in *The New Republic*, 1 November 1999, 29-32 (p. 30).

Also see, Alphonse McCourt, *A Long Stone's Throw: A Memoir* (New York: Sterling and Ross Publishers, 2008).

Malachy McCourt, *A Monk Swimming* (London: Harper Collins, 1999).

Malachy McCourt, *Singing My Him Song* (London: Harper Collins, 2001).

<sup>94</sup> Kevin Myers, 'Cyril's Cinders', in *The Irish Times Column: 'An Irishman's Diary'* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), p. 18.



## Conclusion

These differing approaches to how *Angela's Ashes* has been reworked, rewritten and re-presented/represented in performance is a means of understanding how the pluralist and multivocal elements of music, Hollywood cinema and melodrama make *Angela's Ashes* particularly pertinent for adaptation back into the realm of performance, and why ideas about re-presentation and rewriting inform the thesis. Having established that the Derby Theatre production by Uncontained Arts makes visible the mediation and presentation of 'Irishness' in the text, as opposed to the neutrality of Alan Parker's cinematic adaptation, each of the chapters that follow show the work of production and intervention in McCourt own texts. I reshape the arguments of Joe Cleary and Victor Merriman to evaluate the process of restructure and intervention that McCourt deploys. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of performance to expose the meanings that are generated by the texts themselves and to analyse the impact or significance that selling his own story and that of Ireland's history has upon McCourt's international audience. I make the case that McCourt himself engages with notions of appropriation, and that his writing is a conscious performance formed from a wide range of cultural influences, dramatic predecessors, reference points and intertexts, that permit him to transpose his life story into a product for global consumption. I analyse the impact that McCourt's construction of an Irish identity has in relation to questions of nation, hybridity and politics, placing emphasis upon his autobiographical act of offering an interpretation of the past that prevents his audience from engaging in any wider societal critique. As I have already argued, McCourt was able to do so successfully because Ireland's new found affluence at the time of publication was set against the global appeal of the Irish emigration tale that is played out in *Angela's Ashes*. Cleary and Merriman's ideas of postcolonial political performance allow me to analyse the extent to which McCourt's deployment of

cultural memory and performances of 'Irishness' function, when 'read' to either deconstruct or cement essentialist notions of nationality or ethnicity.

## Chapter 2

### 'I'd Love To Be Irish When It's Time For A Song'<sup>1</sup>

*'All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music, and all art should be judged by the extent to which it approaches musical law'.<sup>2</sup>*

In this chapter I argue that Frank McCourt employs references to music and to musical performance as key structural and thematic devices. He assumes the performative role of the Irish troubadour, or lyric poet/singer by presenting songs and verses that he remembers from his 'miserable Irish Catholic childhood' to illuminate scenarios that he purports to have experienced in his effort to retell the life of what Philip Bohlman has called the ostensible 'unremarkable' figure.<sup>3</sup> I provide evidence of how music helps to shape McCourt's Irish-American identity and I argue that it functions in his writing to confirm or challenge stereotypes. At the forefront of my analysis is Cleary's contention that New York City's allure, 'like that of the American Dream, depends on the idea that the United States represents the abolition of the "Old World" scarcity and the abundance beyond appetite.'<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Cleary's statement that McCourt undertakes an 'unqualified embrace of America as the land of opportunity' allows me to verify that the 'American' cultural signifiers of optimism, emancipation, opportunity, redemption, universalism and multiculturalism become more pressing for McCourt because for him, Limerick embodies poverty, loss and death.<sup>5</sup> In Cleary's terms McCourt challenges his audience to confront the 'dark side of their historical past', and I examine the effect that the musical allusions and references to musical performances at work in McCourt's writing have upon his audience/readership to prove that they act

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<sup>1</sup> 'Tis, p. 279.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1967[1910]), p. 139.

<sup>3</sup> McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*, p. 15.

See Philip Bohlman, 'Viewpoint: On the Unremarkable in Music', in *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Fall 1992): 203-16 (pp. 204, 209, 211). Bohlman's contends that the presence of music within life-writing can provide a valuable perspective on 'coming of age' accounts.

Also see, Jolanta T. Pekacz, 'Memory, History and Meaning: Biography and its Discontents', in *Journal of Musicological Research*, Vol. 23 (2004), 39-80.

Also see, Pekacz, ed., *Musical Biography: Towards New Paradigms* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 287.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

as a stimulus for McCourt's memory, thereby exposing the ability of music to construct consciousness. I provide proof of how musical allusions reinforce textual information for both the informed and uninformed reader because they situate McCourt's memoirs in a particular time and place, thus reflecting the experiences and mood of the generation that his writing recalls. Moreover, the references act as a commentary on McCourt's emotional life. I analyse how these citations illustrate McCourt's complex struggle to reconcile his American birthright with his deprived Irish childhood, and how ethnicity (conceived as cultural identity) and place, reveal the process of identity formation in cross-cultural encounters. Furthermore, we see exemplified Cleary and Merriman's emphasis on the problematic postcolonial status of Ireland and witness the art of 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland operating to certify Ireland's 'modernisation' by representing as 'Other' and over an Irish past of backwardness and scarcity.

Nevertheless, there is a paradox here. Through the process of re-creating his life experience and presenting himself as an 'unremarkable' figure, McCourt became a multi-millionaire and someone who was able to mix with the most powerful cultural and political personalities of his day. This chapter charts the way that McCourt sought to obfuscate the problematic hierarchies involved in the dynamics of his new wealth and class, which had the potential to alienate readers. I argue that McCourt writes very little about the remarkable corridors of power that had been opened to him by his riches, and instead determinedly links his life experience with that of the music of the working-class and the disenfranchised. I establish how in *'Tis*, the book that McCourt wrote after he had become prosperous and perhaps the best-selling author in the world, he seeks to highlight his affinity with New York's Afro-Caribbean jazz culture, sidestepping the issue of his whiteness and wealth, and pointing instead to a questionable postcolonial Irish identification with the black migrant. McCourt seeks to find something of the easy improvisation and experimental style of jazz in the form of his own literary expression. Jazz is characterised by its fluid and expressive movement, alongside polyphonic ensemble playing of syncopated rhythmic patterns. Its deviations

in pitch and timbre, combined with variegated and often individualistic gestures, furthers the connection that McCourt's work makes between the Irish and African-American diasporas. I argue that Irish music exaggerates McCourt's attachment to the romanticised homeland, whereas jazz leads him to assert an adoptive belonging since it is an index of his hybrid cultural identity. Consequently, McCourt explores metastructural issues through musical representations of race, class, and gender, while illustrating how musical style functions to highlight these themes.

The chapter moves on to establish how McCourt's close knowledge of the Irish folk ensemble, The Clancy Brothers, repeatedly finds expression in his work, permitting McCourt to blend Irish culture and heritage, with 'American' culture. Indeed, Cleary notes the role that The Clancys played in creating appreciative new audiences for 'Irish traditional and folk music' during the American folk revival of the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Again, we see cultural memory at work since McCourt's association with The Clancys demonstrates that we do not remember alone; others mediate our memories both socially and culturally. I make the case that McCourt uses the 'traditional' Irish music that he hears the group perform as a model for formulating the assimilation of immigrant communities in New York City. I uncover how he unmask the image of the Irish through song by his interaction with The Clancys, thereby illustrating knowingness about the manipulation of custom. Whether McCourt knows it, the evocation of The Clancy Brothers moves his writing away from essentialist Irish narratives, with the Irish-American community of New York being subject to a range of influences from the eclectic soundscape of the city. This foregrounds the critical gap that Cleary argues exists between Irish and American cultural interactions in light of the fact that the establishment of a 'major Irish emigrant community [...] undoubtedly had consequences for Irish cultural and literary development.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 106.

See *The Story of The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem*, DVD Directed by Derek Bailey and Produced by David Hammond, South Paw Productions, in association with RTE, Shanachie 201 (1984).

<sup>7</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 60.

In the next section of the chapter, I argue that just as in *'Tis* McCourt seeks to use the spontaneity and vitality of jazz in order to connect his life experience with notions of the subaltern in a way that is both anti-authoritarian and carnivalesque (in Bakhtinian terms), he deploys a different set of musical tropes and performances to unite with particular ideas about the Irish historical experience.<sup>8</sup> I establish how McCourt seeks to make his writing align to the diverse musical practices that he has experienced by borrowing or modifying specific aesthetics of Irish music culture to present the character that he gives to his father in *Angela's Ashes*. McCourt's unflattering account of his father's obsessive commitment to Irish nationalism mocks the figure of the Irish rebel rather than offering a comment directly on the nationalist cause itself. I provide evidence that McCourt seeks to recover an 'Irish' radical past that is buried beneath his Irish-American middle-class exterior by shifting the focus from the real to the representational and obfuscating consistently any overt political comment. He appropriates a set of lyrics that relate to experiences that he scarcely knows first hand, but which can be evoked to signify that even as a wealthy New York writer he is in some way connected to a radical and/or revolutionary set of ideas. Yet McCourt chooses to ignore the terrorist violence and exclusivity at the heart of Irish Republicanism to make this aspect of Irish history palatable for his international audience by presenting his father's drunken rendition of particular republican songs through the character of the stage Irishman. McCourt's father's performance exemplifies what Merriman calls 'dystopic visions of an Ireland [populated by] gross caricatures with no purchase on the experiences of today's audiences, their appeal to an emergent consumer-Irish consensus lies in their appearance as ludicrous [... as] the colonized simian reborn.'<sup>9</sup> Merriman is reminding us of Thomas Nast's cartoons, some of which can be seen later in this chapter. Nast gave his Irish characters a simian-like

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<sup>8</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 10, 107. McCourt uses the notion of festival and carnival to overturn the authoritative voice in favour of the normally suppressed voice of the subaltern.

See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313. Spivak is concerned with recovering subaltern agency and 'voice' in history.

<sup>9</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, p. 196.

appearance (a physical representation of their place as a lower order of human than the colonizer) and attired the male figures in a tattered tail coat, with a clay pipe and shillelagh as ubiquitous accessories. Merriman's statement supports my claim that McCourt's self-conscious invocation of Nast's clichés and stereotypes, with their attributes of instability, indolence and inebriation personifies how McCourt manipulates a version of this 'outsider' to fashion the character that he gives to his father. I argue that these patriotic ballads are the mechanisms by which a community remembers key events as part of the larger narratives of identity and belonging. We can see cultural memory at work because McCourt uses references to the past to make a statement in the cultural context of the present. As a consequence, his audience gains access to a shared past, permitting communal nostalgia since identity is bound up with memory, which can be shared, narrated and transmitted through performance to resonate across groups and subsequent generations. Moreover, the evocation of 'Irishness' within these ballads might provide a sense of ethnic privilege for a white United States citizen like McCourt, connecting his narrative with broader ideas about national destiny and heroism at a time of increased global popularity of 'Irishness'. Thus, while such songs speak to the core of McCourt's emotional self, the lyrics are also codes that have come to connote a past sensibility.

### **The Fairytale of New York**

McCourt's use of musical bricolage reveals the self-conscious process of confabulation at work in twentieth-century Irish-American balladry. He demonstrates how an eclectic mix of sounds and musical genres flourished in New York as part of artistic experimentation yet became subject to the commercial intervention of 'Tin Pan Alley'. This was a result of emigration being responsible for the urbanisation of Irish music in cities like New York and Boston, where it helped to establish a sense of collectivity by instituting and strengthening immigrant relationships and framing particular events like weddings and religious festivals. Music also represented security and stability through an invented sense of timelessness and tradition, while intensifying and heightening the

experience of remembering. Indeed, Dennis Clark has argued that 'Celebrations, informal, social interaction, musical gatherings for traditional playing, singing and dancing', helped to cultivate 'mutual identification and attachment among members of the Irish community in America.'<sup>10</sup>

In *'Tis* McCourt acknowledges New York's heteroglossic culture and suggests with irony that New York is far more 'Irish' than Limerick when he recollects his mother's warning to 'marry your own.'<sup>11</sup> McCourt is highlighting how New York re-imagined Ireland for the consumer through the branding of faux Irish-themed bars that play 'Irish' tunes along Second and Third Avenue, for example, or the public musical performances inherent in the St Patrick's Day parade. Indeed, Maureen Dezell posits that fans of "trad" music refer to this practice derisively as "Bing Crosby Irish".<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, McCourt's statement exemplifies W.H.A. Williams's contention that Irish Catholic immigrants found difficulty in adjusting to American life since their 'visibility' meant that their 'Americanisation' would be played out 'quite literally, upon the national stage' with 'song as a key element' of the process.<sup>13</sup> McCourt is also pointing out that parents of his mother's generation assumed that their emigrant offspring would declare their Irish identity publicly and associate solely with those of the Irish diaspora. McCourt admits: 'My own. The Irish. I could drink Irish, eat Irish, dance Irish, read Irish [...] I'd like to be Irish when it's time for a song [...] I'd like to be American when I teach.'<sup>14</sup> While McCourt's declaration suggests that he is romanticising the Irish gift for music, his words are constructed from the language that describes certain types of

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<sup>10</sup> Dennis Clark, *Hibernian America: The Irish and Regional Cultures* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1986), p. 56. For further perspectives on Irish cultural nationalism see Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland, eds., *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999) and Stephen Rohs, *Eccentric Nation: Irish Performance in Nineteenth-Century New York City* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 2009), as well as essays in J.J. Lee and Marion Casey, eds., *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> *'Tis*, p. 279.

Also see Chris Baldick, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) p. 113. Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia describes the existence of conflicting discourses.

<sup>12</sup> Dezell, *Irish America: Coming into Clover*, p. 115.

<sup>13</sup> William H.A. Williams, *'Twas Only an Irishman's Dream: The Image of Ireland and the Irish in American Popular Song Lyrics, 1800-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *'Tis*, p. 279.



performance, and reiterated when he says: 'I'm in New York, [...] but I'm supposed to behave as if I were still in Limerick, Irish at all times.'<sup>15</sup> Indeed, whether he knows it McCourt is articulating Greenblatt's premise that the 'fashioning of human identity' being a 'manipulable, artful process.'<sup>16</sup> McCourt's statement also affirms how individuals fashion themselves according to cultural codes and to inseparably intertwined institutions like family, religion and state.

McCourt's complicated interactions between his Irish and Irish-American self were re-presented in May 1997 at Broadway's Golden Theatre when he performed in his composition, *The Irish and How They Got That Way*, which placed him into the New York theatrical space.<sup>17</sup> Dezell defines this piece of theatre as 'a theatrical mélange of music, history and moments to muse on.'<sup>18</sup> The chronological time-line features thirty-two pieces of music combined with screen-reflected paintings, photographs and drawings that illustrate effectively major scenes from Irish history in short sketches that are enhanced by fragments from books, letters and diaries. The characters are fashioned in traditional costumes, and perform in a manner that caricatures the absurdity, vices and virtues of the national stereotype through humorous limericks, comic songs and traditional dance steps.<sup>19</sup> In this performance piece McCourt appears to have found an alternative use for the research material that he indexed before abandoning, regrettably, his PhD on 'Irish American Literary Relations' at Trinity College Dublin in the late 1960s, as he tells us in *Teacher Man*:

Here were accounts of the Irish hacking and digging and fighting and singing on the Erie Canal, on the Union Pacific Railroad and in the American Civil War itself. On opposite sides, Irishmen often fought their own brothers and cousins [...]. Now

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<sup>15</sup> 'Tis, p. 213.

<sup>16</sup> Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> McCourt, *The Irish And How They Got That Way*. Benefit event for The Irish Repertory Theatre, at The Golden Theatre, New York, 19 May 1997. It ran subsequently for five months at the Irish Repertory Theatre, from 9 September before beginning its National Tour at the Wilbur Theatre in Boston <[http://www.irishrep.org/abenefit\\_2006.htm](http://www.irishrep.org/abenefit_2006.htm)> [accessed 30 January 2009].

*The Irish And How They Got That Way*, typed play script, dated 5 February, 1999, supplied by The Irish Repertory Theatre, New York, received 28 December 2006. Accompanying video recording featuring the original cast, B000N0T3Q4 (1999).

<sup>18</sup> Dezell, *Irish America: Coming into Clover*, p. 87.

<sup>19</sup> 'Who Threw the Overalls in Mrs Murphy's Chowder?' is also the first song mentioned in *Angela's Ashes* (p.3).

I read about Irish music in America, the power and genius of the Irish in American politics, the exploits of the Fighting 69<sup>th</sup>, the millions who cleared a path to the Oval Office for John F. Kennedy. I read accounts of how mean Yankees discriminated against the Irish all over New England and how the Irish fought back and became mayors, governors, party bosses.<sup>20</sup>

McCourt recalls that his 'pile of index cards for the story of the Irish in America grew higher than the ones on literary relations.' At the time, it was not possible to 'stray' into history without the approval of that Department, which McCourt claims would not allow him to change topics because he had no 'background in history.'<sup>21</sup> Even so, McCourt is exercising a selective memory in failing to acknowledge the alternative narrative of the Irish in American history. Emigration was an outlet for the discontented and distressed, and the dream of life in the 'New World' was a welcome alternative to the struggle for existence in Ireland. In addition, there were also emigrants for whom the rise to political and social prominence had an adverse effect for 'newcomers'. For example, while prosperous Irish communities offered an enclave that mirrored life in the old country to new arrivals, these later emigrants were also a threat to the continued prosperity of those for whom emigration had been a success. Nevertheless, McCourt dons the 'stage Irish mask'; an act that Declan Kiberd contends was easier for immigrants rather than attempting to reshape a complex urban identity of their own. In *'Tis* McCourt laments: 'Even when I try to sound American people look puzzled and say, Do I detect an Irish brogue?'<sup>22</sup> This remark is commensurate with Kiberd's suggestion that immigrants adopted an air of 'fawning' duplicity in order to outsmart their counterparts who took them at face value. For instance, labourers doffed their caps to gentleman and intoned ritually in stage Irish dialect "Top of the mornin' to you, sor", while gloating secretly over the fact that 'sor' was an ancient Irish word for 'bastard'.<sup>23</sup> As a consequence, an Irishman could control the stage Irish mask and, therefore, his relationship between the immigrant and his ostensible superior.

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<sup>20</sup> *Teacher Man*, p. 174.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>22</sup> *'Tis*, p. 174.

<sup>23</sup> Kiberd, 'The Fall of the Stage Irishman' in *The Irish Writer and the World*, ed. by Declan Kiberd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005[1979]), 21-41 (p. 25).

McCourt suggests in *'Tis* that music passes the time, entertains, consoles and brings back memories of home for the Irishman in New York. He experiences how emigration enhances music's emotional effects, resonating across distance, both literal and metaphoric: 'Every time I hear Irish music I feel tears coming and I want to be standing on the banks of the Shannon looking at swans.'<sup>24</sup> Here McCourt is evaluating the music that has endured in his memory against the reality of the Irish-American experience in a period that reflects an enormous cultural change, typifying New York as the crucible of Irish America, and acting as a mutual bond with The Clancys. However, McCourt's use of the term 'Irish music' can at times become problematic when it appears to indicate a unitary 'voice', a communal identity and a single 'Irish' musical cultural identity rather than a multitude of views negotiated in different ways and in different settings. Furthermore, McCourt is combining subversively this popular biological image of swans - birds, that form lifelong partnerships - with the idea of flight and abandonment in the Irish story 'The Children of Lir', in order to foreground the idea of Ireland being abandoned by its children who, nonetheless, mourn the loss of their national home and its music.

McCourt emphasises in *'Tis* how music's eclectic nature expresses and mobilises new forms of identity, when on his first Christmas Eve in New York, he recalls walking on Third Avenue with an equally inebriate friend singing 'Don't Fence Me In.'<sup>25</sup> Despite the brevity of this reference it bears analysis since McCourt is clearly using the 'Don't Fence Me In' reference ironically:

Oh, give me land, lots of land under starry skies above,  
Don't fence me in.  
Let me ride through the wide open country that I love,

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<sup>24</sup>*'Tis*, pp. 3, 61.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

'Don't Fence Me In', music by Cole Porter, lyrics by Cole Porter and Robert Fletcher, performed by Roy Rogers in *Hollywood Canteen* directed by Delmar Daves, produced by Alex Gottlieb, Warner Brothers, (1943).

In July 1947 McCourt might have seen, *Don't Fence Me In* featuring Roy Rogers at The Lyric cinema. It was directed by John English and produced by Donald H. Brown, Republic Pictures, (1945). See *Limerick Leader*, 5 July 1947, p. 1, c. 5.

Don't fence me in.  
Let me be by myself in the evenin' breeze,  
And listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees,  
Send me off forever but I ask you please,  
Don't fence me in.<sup>26</sup>

At this juncture McCourt's performance illustrates how song lyrics can both sweeten and sting in the same verse, since being 'fenced in' cushions the pain of loneliness. However, by using irony McCourt is expressing the exact opposite of what he experiences in reality, with 'fenced in' becoming a metaphor for being forced to acquiescence to the social order. The New York of the time stands in sharp contrast to the image invoked by the lyrics of the American West; the myth of the West mirrors the myth of the west of Ireland as an idyllic enclave. Luke Gibbons explains that this notion evolved because the Irish west was furthest removed from the cultural influences of Anglicisation. An organic connection with the land overlaps with a romanticised myth, whereby the remote west serves as a powerful symbolic manifestation of Ireland as not-England. Furthermore, this area of Ireland is seen to resist the urban forces of modernisation and capitalism, being representative of an essentialised 'Irish' or a 'new frontier' that held the promise of a true language and folklore, as well as being a physical location for an unpolluted 'Irish' way of life. However, while the American west is about independence, the Irish west is figured as 'an escape from individualism and the fragmentation of community.'<sup>27</sup> I will return to Gibbons's exploration of the ways in which Irish writers have employed Western themes in the next chapter, for now 'Don't Fence Me In' is performed light-heartedly by McCourt, yet the deep satire within the lyrics foregrounds rather than disguises exclusion and oppression, particularly as the whole idea of virgin frontier land encodes a different type of dispossession than that associated with the native American. Through the lines 'Oh, give me land, lots of land under starry skies/Don't fence me in',

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<sup>26</sup>Alphie McCourt sang 'Don't Fence Me In' on 17 July 2015 in South's Pub, Limerick at the inauguration of a plaque to commemorate Frank McCourt drinking his 'first pint'. Alphie said: 'This song expressed [Frank's] own aspirations.' See, <[www.limerickwriterscentre.com](http://www.limerickwriterscentre.com)> [accessed 24 July 2015].

<sup>27</sup> Luke Gibbons, 'Synge, Country and Western: The Myth of the West in Irish and American Culture', in *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 23-36 (pp. 23-24).

McCourt might find an affinity with the dispossessor. Even so, the strength of McCourt's fascination with American popular culture is conveyed in *Angela's Ashes* through his quest for a Utopia, enhanced through the privilege of listening to Billie Holiday's music on Mrs Purcell's radio. Here we can see how McCourt's 'American Dream' is steeped in the music that is distinctly 'American' to him:

After the news there is the American Armed Forces Network [...] oh man the music of Duke Ellington himself telling me take the A train to where Billie Holiday sings only to me,

I can't give you anything but love, baby,  
That's the only thing I've plenty of, baby.

Oh Billie, Billie, I want to be in America with you and all that music (pp.319-320).

In a reversal of expectation, McCourt is exhibiting something of a rejection of traditional Irish music and the genesis of an enduring interest in popular American forms.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, he knows that an Irish cliché will be lauded in America, and stores Paddy Clohessy's disparaging 'Irishism', 'steam of their piss', as a valuable commodity for use in the land of fabrication: 'I'll keep that for myself [...] and when I go to America some day I'll be the only one who knows it' (p.182). This suggests that McCourt is formulating an Irish identity which I later argue he rejects in *'Tis* by seeking an affinity with the experimental mode of jazz. Yet, by writing down and disseminating this 'Irishism' to non-Irish audiences, McCourt is ruining the notion of it being a secret code. Of course, this idea is also akin to the dissemination of music too, as illustrated in the multivocality of the song 'Don't Fence Me In' and its ability to integrate and contain different 'Irish' ideas and voices.

James Carroll argues that the Irish came to regard the defeated land from which they came as a 'mythic motherland', remembering a land of 'extraordinary beauty [...] the sod with it had been theirs, and not the landlord's [...] an Ireland blessed with rare

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<sup>28</sup> McCourt declared his wish for 'I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby' to be played at his funeral during the programme 'Inheritance Tracks', *Saturday Live*, BBC Radio 4, 15 December 2007. The tune was indeed played at McCourt's Memorial Service by piper Andy McEvoy at The Manhattan Club, New York, 22 July 2009. Charlotte Moore, Director of the Irish Repertory Theatre, New York, sent the Order of Service to me.

human virtues – the courage of the Irish patriots, the conviviality of the pubs.<sup>29</sup> Despite Carroll's dubious generalisation, Irish music plays a key role in the myth of the 'American Dream', and McCourt's use of this fable in *'Tis* illustrates Carroll's description of the Romanticising process of myth making, and the creation of a pseudo 'Emerald' enclave when McCourt says:

When you're Irish and you don't know a soul in New York and you're walking along Third Avenue [...] there's great comfort in discovering there's hardly a block without an Irish Bar [...] and I'm lured in by Bing Crosby on juke boxes singing "Galway Bay" and blinking green shamrocks the like of which you'd never see in Ireland.<sup>30</sup>

McCourt is recalling a manufactured borderland representative of his first impression of Irish-American culture, and being thrust into what Dezell calls 'Celtophilia' and its 'Eiresatz of plastic shamrocks and green beer.' Moreover, she quite rightly regards the Irish in Ireland and the Irish in Irish-America as 'two grand people separated by notions of a singular culture.'<sup>31</sup> Robbie O'Connell, a second-generation member of The Clancys ensemble, performs a comic song that illustrates pithily the ardent preoccupation that the America of this era has with all things Irish, or rather, those things that are believed to be Irish:

You're not Irish, you can't be Irish  
You don't know "Danny Boy",  
Or "Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra"  
Or even "Irish Eyes",  
You've got a hell of a nerve  
To say you come from Ireland  
So cut out all this nonsense  
And sing "McNamara's Band".<sup>32</sup>

O'Connell is articulating the fact that the Ireland that was manufactured through song became the mythical place of the 'Emerald Isle', in contrast to the real Ireland that had been depopulated by famine, poverty and lack of economic prospect. 'America' was the

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<sup>29</sup>James Carroll, quoted by Tom Hayden, ed, in *Irish Hunger: Personal Reflections on the Legacy of the Famine* (Boulder: Robert Rinehart, 1997), pp. 205-11.

<sup>30</sup>*'Tis*, p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Dezell, *Irish America: Coming into Clover*, pp. 2, 3, 190.

<sup>32</sup>Robbie O'Connell, 'You're Not Irish', Track 9 on *Love Of The Land*, Green Linnet, GLCD 1097, Slievenamon Music (BMI), (1985).

land of opportunity, the 'New Jerusalem', while the Ireland created by American popular culture was peopled by beautiful colleens and handsome dark men who chose to stay in Ireland, where they would care for parents who sat by de Valeran glowing firesides, in contrast to the empty hearths caused by poor turf. As Williams argues, an Edenic image was essential to the maintenance of a positive image of the Irish in America: 'The myth of Ireland maintained the myth of the Irish: torn from a fair and perfect land. From homes and loved ones, the Irish came to America, where in the face of many difficulties, they prospered. In other words, for many Irish-Americans, the idea of "Ireland" was predicated upon success in America.'<sup>33</sup> However, McCourt's eyes are far from smiling as he rejects Ireland as the Emerald Isle of Enchantment. In a manner that suggests a deliberate play against the famous words of that song, McCourt employs acoustic metaphors in *Angela's Ashes* to portray a view of Limerick life through the migrant's prism that is bleakly unsentimental:

Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the River Shannon and settle forever in Limerick. The rain dampened the city from the Feast of the Circumcision to New Year's Eve. It created a cacophony of hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks (p.1).

At this point we can see that McCourt depicts Limerick as another Hades, so it is small wonder that he sees New York as his salvation. Furthermore, his brother's naïve view, as recollected in *Angela's Ashes*, pre-empts the strong musical and performative presence that McCourt confronts: 'Michael says it must be great to be in America where you have nothing to do but dance and sing' (p.367). With regard to a land where singing and dancing were essential credentials, Nuala O'Connor believes that for many 'the traditional music of Ireland was the only enduring cultural baggage, intangible as it was, that impoverished emigrants could take out of the country.'<sup>34</sup> McCourt may feel a burden of responsibility to preserve cultural memory because of his claim to diasporic

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<sup>33</sup> Williams, *'Twas Only an Irishman's Dream*, p. 231.

<sup>34</sup> O'Connor, *Bringing It All Back Home*, p. 8. O'Connor disregards literate emigrants like McCourt who affirmed that he brought the *Complete Works of Shakespeare* with him from Ireland in a conversation with Scott Simon, at the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, 26 April 2014  
<ref<http://www.jfklibrary.org/~media/assets/Education%20and%20Public%20Programs/Forum%20Transcripts/A%20Conversation%20with%20Frank%20Mccourt.pdf>> [accessed 14 February 2014].

heritage, which might be felt more keenly because of his belonging to a dispersed group. Certainly McCourt transmits how émigré communities continue to cling tenaciously to their traditional music in order to preserve their identity in an alien land. He renders how music helps emigrants to assimilate through participation while simultaneously identifying with multiple communities across time and space where music is experienced both physically and psychologically. As O'Connor suggests, they wanted to forget the bad times and if good times could not be found 'they could be invented.'<sup>35</sup> Conversely, Irish musician Mick Moloney highlights the mixed feelings that he believes the Irish had towards their culture: 'They loved the old music and they loved being Irish. On the other hand they wanted to shed the negative images coming from an oppressed peasant culture, and embedded in the culture itself was the music.'<sup>36</sup> McCourt demonstrates this sentiment and how in the Irish-American diaspora feelings of homesickness and isolation might be intensified through music's emotive power.

### **Fascinating Rhythm**

McCourt's youthful rapture with Billie Holiday's voice emerges as a significant force and assumes a seminal influence in *'Tis* because the adventurous and exploratory nature of jazz augments the social and cultural revolutionary collision that McCourt struggles to reconcile. He affirms Alice Gerstel's contention that jazz surfaced in the 'sterile' time after World War I, emerging as a creative force that typified the 'genius of the eclectic, the cocktail mix of souls.'<sup>37</sup> Ironically, it is Irish-American twins, Frankie and Danny Lennon, who cultivate McCourt's appreciation: 'Paddy Arthur McGovern warns me that if I keep on listening to that noisy jazz music I'll wind up like the Lennon brothers so

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<sup>35</sup> O'Connor, *Bringing It All Back Home*, p. 61.

<sup>36</sup> Mick Moloney, 'Edward Harrigan and the Beginning of American Musical Theatre', Paper given at the American Conference for Irish Studies, *Ireland and the Americas*, at The City University New York, 21 April 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Alice Gerstel, 'Jazz Band', in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. by Anton Kaes, et al (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 554-555. It is unsurprising that McCourt came to love jazz, since from the 1940s New York City was the world's largest jazz community. See Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994), p. 5.



American I'll forget I'm Irish altogether and what will I be then.<sup>38</sup> Paddy's opinion highlights music as an indispensable part of the vocabulary of cultural difference, and that it inevitably participates in the expression of ethnic identity. He defies the cross-fertilisation of musical ideas between the homeland and the diaspora. In so doing Paddy resists the total acculturation that produces the hybrid Irish-American, insisting on the retention of personal and musical identity that he believes the Lennon brothers reject. In striving for such reconciliation, McCourt acknowledges the clash of cultures that his references to Irish-American music elsewhere contradict, while foregrounding jazz as a symbol of both modernity and the notion of living the 'American Dream'. Moreover, the improvisation that is the fundamental principal of jazz mirrors McCourt's quest for an individual expression that rejects having to be 'Irish', which is shown succinctly in the way that the Lennon brothers make 'Irishness' appear unfashionable and unattractive, echoing McCourt's own rejection of Irish dancing, as we saw in Chapter 1.

McCourt's enthrallment with jazz can be understood through Bruce Johnson's belief that it encourages interaction and reinterpretation: 'The sound can be rearranged at the whim of the listener: by singing along, playing tracks in different orders, transferred, spliced, sampled. It can be listened to under a wide range of social conditions with personalised codings.'<sup>39</sup> As I stated in the introductory chapter, the idea of 'personalised codings' is commensurate with Bennett's premise that the performative world is subject to an extensive system. Bennett argues that although part of the audience's role is to understand performative sign systems, the extent of their comprehension depends upon a shared socio-cultural background between 'text' and audience.<sup>40</sup> Johnson and Bennett's view is exemplified in the Lennons' patent appreciation of how jazz lays special emphasis on exuberant performance in which repetitive physical actions move the body in ways that are distinguishable from

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<sup>38</sup> 'Tis, p. 196.

<sup>39</sup> Bruce Johnson, 'Jazz as Cultural Practice', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke and David Horn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 96-113 (p. 108).

<sup>40</sup> Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, p. 142.

everyday speech and action. McCourt describes them as 'two mad professors' who click their fingers to the beat as they instruct him about significant jazz performances styles:

Listen to Lionel Hampton, all velvet and glide, listen to him and Benny coming in [...] and here comes Harry sending in a few notes [...] and Krupa going bap-bap-bap-do-bap-e-bap [...] listen to that audience, outa their mind, man, outa their ever-lovin' mind.<sup>41</sup>

McCourt confesses: 'I listen because I never listened like this before and now I hear what I never heard before [...] the musicians take passages from tunes and turn them upside down and inside out [...] as if to say, look, we borrowed your little tune awhile to play our own way.'<sup>42</sup> McCourt is singling out the act of embellishing the music in an apparently spontaneous fashion and altering its rhythms by syncopation.<sup>43</sup>

Krin Gabbard draws attention to the way that jazz has been defined since the 1940s around a set of dualisms: 'Black versus white, art versus commerce, nature versus culture, technique versus affect, European versus native.'<sup>44</sup> There is an episode in *Tis* where McCourt not only confirms this binary opposition but also illustrates how he seeks to appropriate the black experience when he recalls Paddy Arthur McGovern's petulant act of pulling a Duke Ellington record off the phonograph and replacing it with Frank Lee's Tara Ceilidhe Band: 'We sit around the living room, listening, tapping slightly, and not moving our faces. The Lennons laugh, and leave.'<sup>45</sup> Yet, McCourt himself appropriates jazz forms to connect Irish and African-American cultures to challenge racial stereotypes and promote social integration. By incorporating a music that performs an ideological role in the face of oppressive social and political constraints, he is foregrounding how black musicians struggled against the prejudice of the dominant culture. In its drive for self-expression, jazz challenges social and cultural hierarchies and subverts notions of racial difference, having a positive effect on the

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<sup>41</sup> *Tis*, p. 181.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>43</sup> See, David Horn, 'The Identity of Jazz', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, 9-32, (pp. 16-17).

<sup>44</sup> Krin Gabbard, 'The Word Jazz', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, 1-6, (pp. 1, 5).

<sup>45</sup> *Tis*, p. 182.

social standing of African-Americans. Such a discourse of subjugation permits McCourt to articulate a more public and autonomous visage for the pejorative voicing of the minority, seizing what Edward Said calls 'the power to narrate', by claiming narrative agency in the knowledge that issues of subjectivity, authority and agency are central to first-person accounts of dispossessed or subordinate groups.<sup>46</sup> On a musical level, the Clancys incorporate a five-string banjo into their Irish folk repertoire; an instrument that indicates something of America's mixed racial history, since it is thought to have come from West Africa then to the Caribbean before arriving in America with the first black slaves.<sup>47</sup> This serves to strengthen McCourt's quest to sidestep the issues of his whiteness and wealth in favour of aligning himself (and The Clancys' music, whether he knew it) with the black migrant.

In contrast to the traditional songs sung at the end of *Angela's Ashes* during McCourt's American wake, his imagined sexual liberation comes to fruition at a 'pawty' upon arrival in New York, at which 'bad women' play Frank Sinatra swing jazz records (pp.423-425). As well as being a playfully parodic use of the American vernacular, McCourt is stressing that returning to the country of his birth can fulfil his somewhat surreal perception of American life as well as signalling the process of his maturation. Gabbard contends that from the 1920s jazz appeared in literary works as a synonym for sexual intercourse, and cites evidence collated by Dick Holbrook (which has been used subsequently by Lewis Porter) to report the view of one jazz enthusiast: 'When you went out for a little Jazz [circa 1910], you just weren't singing *Dixie*.'<sup>48</sup> Gabbard argues further that in this context, the word "jazz" was probably related to the word 'jism', a slang term for semen. Hence, the expression is indeed related to sexual vigour and the possibilities of sexual transgression since the listener was perceived to be in danger of falling prey to unleashed sexual abandon because of the eroticism embedded

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<sup>46</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. xiii.

<sup>47</sup> O'Connor, *Bringing It All Back Home*, p. 110.

<sup>48</sup> See Gabbard, 'The Word Jazz', p. 2, and Dick Holbrook, 'Our Word JAZZ', in *Storyville*, December 1973 – January 1974, pp. 46-58, as well as Lewis Porter, *Jazz: A Century of Change* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), p. 4.

in the jazz sound. Of course, this foregrounds WASPish spiteful malice, and the resentment and fear of the virile, sexual potency of black males by white men in a patriarchal society. Blackness itself was pathologised as a deviant identity, and the black male was stereotyped (and subsequently mythologised) as a hyper-sexed, almost animal-like, entity.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the effect of jazz on females like McCourt's 'bad women' was profound since the music also brought about experimentation in dance given the synergy between the two cultural activities. Thanks to the developing norms of the 'jazz age' women could dance with a new vitality, resulting in the overt eroticisation of the female body so that when McCourt returned to New York in 1949, Sinatra's music accompanied syncopated rhythms and isolated body actions (gyrating and thrusting hips) that were regarded as distinct cultural movements associated with sexual pleasure.<sup>50</sup>

In Ireland, meanwhile, one obsession that remained constant and central was the Catholic clergy's belief that public dancing provided the opportunity for illicit and unsupervised dalliance between the sexes. Because of such neurosis, the hierarchal Catholic clergy issued a statement in October 1925 that proclaimed dancing 'a dangerous occasion of sin', stating:

It is the sport of the evil spirit for those who have no true self-respect. To say nothing of the special danger of drink, imported dances of an evil kind, the surroundings of the dancing hall, withdrawal from the hall for intervals, and the dark ways home have been the destruction of virtue in every part of Ireland.<sup>51</sup>

Through such public proclamations and covert lobbying, the Irish government was pressured to pass legislation that imposed Catholic moral norms on the state. Subsequently, the Public Dance Halls Act was enforced in 1935 (without debate in the

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<sup>49</sup> See, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (Boston: Yale University Press, 1992) and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986 [1952]).

<sup>50</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on this issue, see Joshua Zeitz, *Flapper: A Madcap Story of Sex, Style, Celebrity, and the Women Who Made America Modern* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007).

<sup>51</sup> See 'Irish Hierarchy's Statement on Dancing (1925)', <<http://lxa.wordpress.com/2012/02/16/irish-hierarchy-statement-on-dancing-1925/>> [accessed 14 July 2012].

Also see Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class and Irishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 211.

Dáil), to cease the custom of crossroads (outdoor) and night dances.<sup>52</sup> This Act confirms the Church's significant influence on Irish policy making, and how its conservative Roman Catholicism would distinguish Ireland less by its Celtic traditions than by its religion. Irish citizens were encouraged to dance the relatively chaste céilí dances in new Parochial Halls under the watchful eye of the Parish Priest. Conversely, Irish dance halls had existed in Boston as early as the 1850s, yet after the stock market crash of 1929, there occurred a complete reversal from the ban on 'house' dances in Ireland. According to Susan Gedutis, 'Irish-born "greenhorns" and first-generation "narrowbacks" alike crowded into small city apartments to dance and socialize.'<sup>53</sup> This notwithstanding, the New York dance halls helped ease emigrants' transition to their new life and community. Their first introduction by relatives to other migrants or potential employers was often through the dance hall, of which there were plenty in Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn, many of which were associated with particular counties or regions such as the Mayo Halls, the Sligo House or the New Munster Ballrooms. Yet, they all featured 'Irish and American dancing' performed by a range of popular dance orchestras, combining Irish and contemporary American music.<sup>54</sup>

For McCourt, however, jazz creates a meeting point to open the dialogue about bridging the liminal space and closing the cultural gap. In the artistic cauldron of New York, 'living' to McCourt is the triple culture of jazz, literature and 'traditional' Irish music. His description of the 'Beats' reading their verses in Greenwich Village cafés, drinking and smoking pot simultaneously, with jazz musicians in the background, offers

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<sup>52</sup> See Valerie Austin, 'The Céilí and the Public Dance Hall Act, 1935', in *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies*, *The Irish American Cultural Institute*, 28 (3), (Fall, 1993), 7-16 (pp. 11, 13-14). A public dancing license was issued only to those whom a district judge considered of 'good character' (usually the Parish Priest). The Gardi, who had the authority to arrest offenders and bring them to Court to be fined, enforced the Act.

Also see, Dermot Keogh, *The Vatican, the Bishops and Irish Politics 1919-39* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 73, 93, and J.H. Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923-1970* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1971).

<sup>53</sup> Susan Gedutis, *See You at the Hall: Boston's Golden Era of Irish Music and Dance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), pp. 7, 29.

<sup>54</sup> See Marion R. Casey, 'Twentieth Century Irish Immigration to New York-the Historical Perspective' in *New York Irish History* Vol. 3, (1988), pp. 25-29. Also see Donal O'Donovan, ed., *Dreamers of Dreams: Portraits of the Irish in America* (Bray: Kilbride Books, 1984).

a vivid portrait of this potent cocktail of cultures.<sup>55</sup> McCourt finds an affinity with jazz because it allows for vigorous interaction, rising like himself as a product of 'melting-pot' America. However, its eclectic nature with its fluid and animated style expressed with dynamism and exuberance, emerges in parallel to McCourt's reflection on his assimilation and is counterpoint to his constant 'dark clouds' caused by his struggle to assimilate in New York for which he finds solace in the aforementioned triple culture.<sup>56</sup> However, as we shall see, The Clancys play a part in complicating McCourt's struggle to become purely 'American'.

### **Frank McCourt and The Clancy Brothers: Irish Rovers**

McCourt deploys a different set of musical tropes and performances to connect his life experience with particular ideas about the Irish historical experience that is set in opposition to the aforementioned questionable identification with the black diaspora. To do so, McCourt uses his interaction with The Clancy Brothers to unmask the part that America played in constructing the image of the Irish through song. The group's performances were pivotal in the United States, reflecting the cultural and social conditions that shaped Irish-American identity. They developed a culturally hybrid form of music that operated by the cross-fertilisation of sounds from Ireland, the U.S.A and an assortment of other musical traditions whereby they re-fashioned old tunes into new forms that migrated through and between the heterogeneous cultures of Irish-America. In *Tis*, McCourt recalls chatting to Paddy and Tom Clancy in the White Horse Tavern in New York's Greenwich Village in 1958 and listening to them 'sing in the back room.'<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Liam Clancy confirms the extent of their association, recalling that McCourt's mother, the eponymous Angela, of whom McCourt says in *Tis* was 'known to

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<sup>55</sup> *Tis*, pp. 278, 271.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 226, 230.

McCourt in conversation with Terence Patrick Winch, 'The Writing Life', 2009 (exact date unknown). Also see <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTyPRnoKe\\_A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTyPRnoKe_A)> [accessed 22 February 2013]. McCourt told writer and musician, Terence Patrick Winch, that he had been 'very friendly' with The Clancys. Also see <<http://terencewinch.com/>>, which indicates that the conversation was shortly before McCourt's death in July 2009 [accessed 22 February 2013].

one and all for the way she sang a good song', used to baby-sit for the Clancy family.<sup>58</sup>

Clancy says further:

[At Christmas] we took the holly bush around in a car [...] from one little country pub to another, singing the wran song in each one [...] Years later, living in New York the McCourt brothers and ourselves [...] would deck ourselves out [...] going from pub to Irish pub up along Third and Second Avenue singing.<sup>59</sup>

The Clancys did not experience the same struggle to develop their own identity that McCourt claims to have had. Moreover, the group resisted being co-opted into an essentialising narrative, despite their strong regional Celtic visibility being emphasised by the embellishment of their native Tipperary pronunciation and clichéd speech patterns. In fact, the group's sartorial insignia of white Aran sweaters (*bánín*), and tweed caps became a resonant if contrived visual emblem of their Irish heritage, acting as 'souvenirs' or as a way of mobilising memory through being synonymous with the elemental forces of landscape that became crucial to their identity. David Lloyd discusses the fetishisation of goods that are symbolically connected to the 'homeland', arguing that such 'kitsch' objects require levels of familiarity and stylisation in order to perform their nationalist function of 'represent[ing] a whole.'<sup>60</sup> Ironically, contemporary Aran sweaters are made from merging traditional Aran yarns with the softer New Zealand fleeces or from wool from other Irish mills in Tipperary, Wexford, Cavan and Mullingar.<sup>61</sup> However, in Lloyd's terms, memory can be contained in objects, and the Clancys' trademark equipage attests to the sentimental appeal of kitsch items, even though the garments are aesthetically shallow. According to Lloyd, enjoyment derives

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<sup>58</sup> *Tis*, p. 385.

Todd Leopold, article about Liam Clancy, CNN 14 March 2002, Posted: 2:31 PM EST (1931 GMT) <<http://archives.cnn.com/2002/SHOWBIZ/Music/03/14/liam.clancy/index.html>> [accessed 1 July, 2007].

<sup>59</sup> Liam Clancy, *The Mountain of the Women: Memoirs Of An Irish Troubadour* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), p. 177.

<sup>60</sup> David Lloyd, 'The Recovery of Kitsch', in *Ireland After History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), 89-100 (pp. 89-90). Also see Gibbons, 'Synge, Country and Western: The Myth of the West in Irish and American Culture', pp. 23-24. The idea that the elemental forces of landscape are synonymous with The Clancys' clothing echoes Gibbons's contention that an unspoilt physical location equates to an unpolluted 'Irish' way of life.

See also, Jean Baudrillard, *Revenge of the Crystal: Selective Writings on the Modern Object and its Destiny, 1968-1983*, ed. and trans. by Paul Foss and Julian Pefanis (London: Pluto, 1990) p. 75. Baudrillard suggests that kitsch may be a 'cliché' and a 'cultural category', characterised by its 'plethora' and 'overabundance.'

<sup>61</sup> Carol Feller, *Contemporary Irish Knits* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2011), pp. 1,10.

from the satisfaction of experiencing the emotional response that arises from what the items signify, since for the consumer, they resonate with ideas of patriotism and cultural belonging. When the Clancys' performance ensemble is viewed from Lloyd's perspective we can see how kitsch objects function to deconstruct 'Irishness'. Nonetheless, the appeal of their attire accentuated their popularity and helped to negotiate a positive acceptance, being imbued with symbols of national culture that aimed to enrich their audience's association with the place from which The Clancys' clothing was assumed to have originated, thereby inducing nostalgia. As Lloyd would have it, this mode of engagement passes into kitsch consumerism because such reproducibility encourages a form of ownership that is second-hand because the 'authentic' can never be retrieved.

In *'Tis*, McCourt uses The Clancys deftly as a lens to understand better the psyche of Irish immigrants during a decade marked by the rise of popular culture. To portray the New York of this period as a territory of contrasts, he deploys the Bob Dylan song title, 'The times they are a-changin'' to highlight a society in transition. This sentiment is born out by The Clancys dispelling some of the negativity about the stereotypical figure of the Irish immigrant by lending vitality to the image of the Irish in New York.<sup>62</sup> While their influence upon the eclectic sound of American folk derived from adapting the British folk song into an Irish form, appropriation and adaptation was strongly influenced by The Clancys' American experience, and not least their acting careers. Despite this paradox, the group ensured the longevity of Irish music as the wealth of their cultural reservoir flowed into the mainstream of American popular culture, while their public performances correlated with the venues where McCourt claims to have felt most relaxed:

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<sup>62</sup>*'Tis*, p. 349. 'The Times They Are a-Changin'' written and recorded by Bob Dylan for Columbia Records, CL 1025 (1964). The Clancys impressed Dylan enough for him to 'borrow' their melody of 'The Patriot Game' for the lyrics for 'With God on our Side', track 3 on the album *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, Columbia Records MOVLP241 (1964).



Paddy Clancy lived around the corner from me in Brooklyn Heights. He called to see if I'd like to go to the opening of a new bar in the Village, the Lions Head [... which] became my home away from home, a place where I could feel comfortable the way I never did in uptown bars.<sup>63</sup>

Gedutis believes that Irish-Americans have always had their own repertoire of songs, which they feel are 'just as Irish as the songs any Irishman knows.'<sup>64</sup> However, the homogenous nature of 'true' Irish songs can be challenged because the 'Tin Pan Alley' industry exploited Irish immigrant communities and composed 'Irish' songs that either evoked or constructed an anthology of reminiscences that played upon Halbwachs's notion of 'collective memory'. Gedutis cites the radio host Seamus Mulligan's opinion that songs like 'I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen', 'It's a Great Day For The Irish' and 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling', were 'stuff that the Irish would not tolerate.' Consequently, Mulligan defines the 'two parallel universes of the Irish-American musical world [...] operatic parlour type songs written by Irish-Americans for Irish-Americans, and ballads that emigrated with the Irish.'<sup>65</sup> George M. Cohen, whose compositions McCourt showcases in *The Irish And How They Got That Way*, wrote the popular and successful songs 'Over There', 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' and 'Give My Regards to Broadway'. Similarly, despite being composed in New York for the 1944 Irish-American audience of *Going My Way*, Chauncery Olcott's 'Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra', is an exceptional example of what is regarded as quintessential Irish music and exemplifies the way in which sentimentality became the signature of music from or associated with Ireland.<sup>66</sup>

Such 'Irish' songs can be seen as a conduit through which both community and industry interests can be articulated and negotiated, and through which 'faux' Irish music can interact and develop. Yet for some, commercial Irish music was bound to be

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<sup>63</sup> 'Tis, p. 327.

<sup>64</sup> Seamus Mulligan quoted in Gedutis, *See You at the Hall: Boston's Golden Era of Irish Music and Dance*, p. 71.

<sup>65</sup> Gedutis, *See You at the Hall: Boston's Golden Era of Irish Music and Dance*, p. 71. Tin Pan Alley is the collective name for the music publishing business based around New York's 28<sup>th</sup> Street. Mulligan hosted 'A Feast of Irish Music' on WATD 95.9 FM, see p. 33.

<sup>66</sup> Moloney, from 'Edward Harrigan and the Beginning of American Musical Theatre'.

deemed to be less authentic, and, therefore, less 'Irish'. However, these songs are re-imported and re-performed regularly in Ireland though public performances like the St Patrick's Day parade. As a consequence, they have *become* Irish, particularly as groups like The Dubliners and Plaxty have included many American 'Irish' songs in their repertoire (as well as Spanish Civil War songs, songs about African famine, and Scottish folk tunes), which deconstructs all notions of single 'Irishness' within any city.

Moloney, meanwhile, highlights how songwriters produced 'Oirish' [*sic*-Moloney's term] songs that 'entered the repertoire of every Irish singer.'<sup>67</sup> He believes that because Irish-Americans wanted to reject the traditional music that was associated with a 'low-status, poverty stricken peasant environment', they gravitated towards sounds that painted a rosy, 'romantic scenario of a little green haven nestling in a corner of paradise.'<sup>68</sup> A notable example of a popular yet enduring clichéd 'Irish' song is 'The Londonderry Air', or 'Danny Boy' as it is more prevalently known. McCourt's brother, Malachy, has established that differing sets of words were attached to the tune after its first publication in 1855. However, those that have become most identified with the air are:

O Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling,  
from glen to glen and down the mountainside [...]

These words, initially intended for a different tune, were written in 1910 by Frederick E. Weatherly, an English lawyer who, according to Malachy McCourt, probably 'never set foot in Ireland.' However, when some years later, Weatherly's sister-in-law sent him the familiar melody from Australia, he discovered the perfect tune for his verses.<sup>69</sup> Thus an 'Irish' classic was created from words written by an Englishman, who may have been thinking about Scotland, since Ireland has no glens and few mountains. 'Danny Boy' is performed by street musicians, Irish nationalists, homesick emigrants, and by a wider public as an expression of loss and longing. In the process, this musical

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<sup>67</sup> Moloney, quoted by Nuala O'Connor in *Bringing It All Back Home* (London: BBC Books, 1991), p. 61.

<sup>68</sup> Moloney, from 'Edward Harrigan and the Beginning of American Musical Theatre'.

<sup>69</sup> Malachy McCourt, *Danny Boy: The Legend of the Beloved Irish Ballad* (Running Press Book Publishers, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2002), pp. 34-35.

text exhibits how musical meanings mutate across time and space, illustrating Said's proposition that musical practice may be 'contrapuntal': that it may embody and enact both imperial power and resistance to it.<sup>70</sup>

Although Williams argues that it was extraordinary that Irish-Americans accepted Tin Pan Alley's version of Ireland through song, he nonetheless acknowledges that this was the only way for them to reclaim the Erin that had been manufactured:

It was as children not of historical Ireland, but of Erin, or in her Twentieth-century transformation, the Emerald Isle, that the Irish finally gained acceptance within American popular culture. The myth of the Emerald Isle provided the meeting place for the two strains of the Irish stereotype; the sentimental, nostalgic myth created by Moore, of exiles from a lost land; and the general, good-hearted, and dependable character of the Tin Pan Alley Irish American.<sup>71</sup>

The Clancys refused to include 'Orish' songs in their repertoire vehemently and consistently, presenting an image of 'Irish' Ireland without having to resort to Tin Pan Alley's institutionalisation of the image of mythical Mother Ireland, or the Emerald Isle of Enchantment. McCourt's repeated turn towards the group serves to reiterate and secure the class-based identity that he himself has long since transcended. We learn from McCourt's writing that hitherto, The Clancys' performances in the Red Lion and The White Horse Tavern serve as an environment whereby McCourt feels a connection between the exilic space and the imagined space of Ireland. This association between the culture of home and exile is central to what Peter Bailey has termed a 'culture of consolation', that was part of a utopian desire for escape.<sup>72</sup> Of course, this notion correlates to Benedict Anderson's contention that a nation is a community that is socially constructed or imagined by those who perceive themselves as part of that group, even though they will 'never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.'<sup>73</sup> Indeed, it is this idea of fraternity and solidarity that makes it possible for McCourt's

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<sup>70</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 68.

<sup>71</sup> Williams, *'Twas Only an Irishman's Dream*, p. 240.

<sup>72</sup> Peter Bailey, ed., *The Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), p. xv.

<sup>73</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 6-7, 26.

father to pledge to die willingly for such an imagined construction or community. Even so, we must consider how McCourt deploys music to create his father's character in a way that might veil McCourt's own patriotic sympathies.

### **The Irish Stereotype: 'Oh my Papa to me he was so wonderful' <sup>74</sup>**

McCourt deploys melodic references in *Angela's Ashes* as a romantic counter-point to the anti-romantic content. He generates a musical and textual interplay that exemplifies Merriman's idea of 'reductive stereotypes' to present Ireland as a 'benighted dystopia' that implicates his audience in particular negative stances towards the poor, the past and Irishness.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, McCourt creates a version of 'Irishness', that Cleary argues is replete with recurrent clichés and stereotypical characters that can be seen as a throwback to the 'undisciplined, trashy, slovenly and rebellious old nationalist Ireland that [emigrants like McCourt] wanted to leave behind.'<sup>76</sup> Music figures as an index of identity that McCourt uses to establish the character of Malachy, his 'shiftless, loquacious alcoholic father, who says in *Angela's Ashes* that 'it's never too early to learn the songs [...] of your ancestors' (p. 156). In doing so McCourt encompasses what Williams has termed the 'all-persuasive' and 'most conspicuous' characteristic of the Irish stereotype, 'the drunken Paddy.'<sup>77</sup> Dezell, meanwhile, defines *Angela's Ashes* specifically as memorably portraying the contemporary Irish-American stereotypical drunk: 'Redolent with the real gifts of the Irish inheritance — humour, talk, irony — *Angela's Ashes* underscores a truth about Irish American culture that should go without saying but warrants repeating: The Irish voice in America, surly and sloppy when drunk, is most exquisitely expressed when the words aren't slurred.'<sup>78</sup> Dezell's contention is exemplified when McCourt hears the Lennon twins sing the 1940s popular American song, 'Oh my Papa', which ignites his

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<sup>74</sup> *Tis*, p. 181.

<sup>75</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, pp. 209, 195, 196.

<sup>76</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 290.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, 'Twas Only an Irishman's Dream, p. 149.

<sup>78</sup> Dezell, *Irish America: Coming into Clover*, p. 139.

childhood memories of his father's inebriation.<sup>79</sup> The Lennon's rendition is clothed in irony, since their own Irish-American father lives on the streets and wanders around with a pint of wine in a paper bag, undertaking cleaning chores in exchange for alcoholic refreshment.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, this one-line inclusion is a striking example of McCourt's understated approach to musical reference, which stands in stark contrast to Edna O'Brien's less subtle contention that the Irish use 'the Irish opium' either through decision or to 'distance their fate.'<sup>81</sup>

Yet in both New York and Limerick, McCourt's father displays the conspicuous characteristics of inebriation, although according to Elizabeth Malcolm: 'In Ireland drink was a sign of male identity; in America it was a symbol of Irish identity.' She expresses her concern not so much with 'Why did Paddy drink' but 'Which Paddy Drank?'<sup>82</sup> McCourt makes his opinion about such sentiment clear by presenting his father as a tragic-comic romantic; a complex combination of gentleness, doomed aspiration and alcoholism who positions himself amongst Ireland's failed heroes. He likens his father to 'the Holy Trinity, with three people in him; The one in the morning with the paper, the one at night with the stories and the prayers, and then the one who does the bad thing and comes home with the smell of whiskey and wants us to die for Ireland' (p.239). In the Irish version, the demeaning ethnic stereotypical image of the drunken, fighting Irishman had been shaped long before McCourt's return to New York. From 1800, and especially after the famine, the Irish were the oldest and largest ethnic

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<sup>79</sup>'Oh My Papa', adapted from Paul Burkhard's composition 'O Mein Papa' (1939) by John Turner and Geoffrey Parsons, recorded by Eddie Fisher, on RCA Victor, Cat. No. B10614 (1954).

<sup>80</sup>'Tis, p. 181.

<sup>81</sup> O'Brien, *James Joyce*, p. 25. O'Brien repeated a version of this statement to me after her address at *Irish London: Print, Politics and Performance in the Long Nineteenth Century*, at the University of Notre Dame, 10 September 2009.

Also see, Edna O'Brien, *Mother Ireland* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978[1976]), p. 88.

<sup>82</sup>Elizabeth Malcolm, *Ireland Sober, Ireland Free: Drink and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), p. 334.

Also see, Gibbons, *The Quiet Man* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), p. 96. Gibbons comments that 'it is not that [stereotypes] are untrue but that they are portrayed as the norm.'

group of English speaking emigrants.<sup>83</sup> They were distinct and highly visible. A negative perception originated during this time of mass emigration, despite the influence of The Pioneer Total Abstinence Association of the Sacred Heart (or P.T.A.A.) by James Cullen in 1898 in response to widespread alcoholism among Irish Catholics.<sup>84</sup>

To some extent McCourt consciously depicts the Irish as a beleaguered race, populated by the oversimplified stereotype of the drunken Irishman mired in poverty, which may feed the reader's preconceived idea of the drinker, brawler or 'quiet man' syndrome who, paradoxically, is neither given to talking about himself and his exploits, nor to loud expressions of emotion. For the most part, this stereotype was endorsed by Irish-America through being representative of what Protestant America despised. The Irish were Celts, rather than Anglo-Saxons; Papists, rather than Protestants. Darwin's Theory of Evolution had encouraged a range of English and Anglo-American ethnic slurs that were illustrated by Republican, political cartoonist, Thomas Nast's creation of a cross between a professional boxer and an orangutan to reflect the prevailing opinion of what drunken 'Paddys', intimidating 'Micks' and brusque 'Biddies' resembled.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Patrick J. Blessing, 'Irish Emigration to the United States, 1800-1920: An Overview', in *The Irish in America: Emigration, Assimilation and Impact*, ed. by P.J. Drudy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 11-38 (p.11).

<sup>84</sup>Shane Butler, *Alcohol, Drugs and Health Promotion in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2002), p. 19. Members of this still influential organisation are teetotallers who are known commonly as Pioneers.

<sup>85</sup>Nast's cartoons were published from the 1870s until the 1890s, and are reproduced by L. Perry Curtis Jnr., in *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971).



Thomas Nast

Irish and Catholic

Thomas Nast's cartoon 'Killing the Goose that laid the Golden egg', from *Harper's Weekly*, 18 November 1871



Thomas Nast's cartoon 'The Usual Irish Way Of Doing Things', from *Harpers Weekly*, 2 September 1871



'The King of A-Shantee', Frederick B. Opper's drawing of Paddy and his wife, from *Puck*, Vol. 10, No. 58, 15 February, 1882, p. 378.

Andrew Greeley laments that while these caricatures were a result of twentieth-century sociologists representing an anti-Irish bias, a negative identity evolved into a more appealing image with the stage caricatured Irishman: 'The happy Irish-American drunk has been imposed on the Irish Catholic culture in the United States every bit as much as the 'Stepin-Fetchit' stereotype has been imposed on black culture.'<sup>86</sup> Irish immigrants either conformed to the stereotype often, or reinvented who they were perceived to be. Dezell cites Garrett O'Connor's view that for Irish Catholics in particular, getting drunk is supposed to be the same thing as being Irish. O'Connor argues: 'No other ethnic group demeans itself this way'; an opinion that suggests that

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<sup>86</sup>Andrew Greeley, *The Irish Americans: The Rise of Money and Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), pp. 171-172, (175-176).



this image is merely a characteristic associated with 'Irishness', and propagated by 'stage Irishness' defined in clichéd terms.<sup>87</sup>

It is in this sense that I argue that The Clancys illustrate the eclecticism of McCourt's cultural references and enjoyed a popularity that was due to the hybridity of their performance. As J. S. Bratton has observed, songs like 'Finnegan's Wake' helped performers and audiences to deal with topics and emotions, which, while common, might otherwise have been discomfiting.<sup>88</sup> The Clancys made frequent use of this tune and others, particularly 'Jug of Punch' and 'The Parting Glass', that depict drinking, fighting, dancing, singing and general exuberance that is attributed to the Irish temperament. However, McCourt's father does not perform such an enthusiastic rendition. Instead, he conforms to Pádraig Pearse's definition of patriotism as being in large part 'a memory of heroic dead men and a striving to accomplish some task left unfinished by them.'<sup>89</sup> In considering the manner in which McCourt's father uses certain songs to educate his sons in the principles of nationalism we must look more closely at the way that McCourt constructs his character.

### **The Irish Rebel**

As Foster points out, the 1930s Ireland that McCourt recalls was one at which nationalism was at its height, a time when the country was marked by 'rigorous conservatism' and preoccupation with cultural and political 'self-definition against Britain.'<sup>90</sup> Historically, music was an important ideological tool in both the cultural and the more militant nationalist movements during the nineteenth century. Thomas Osborne Davis, founder of the nationalist Young Ireland movement on 29 March 1839, and editor of the nationalist journal *The Nation* (launched on 15 October 1842), defines music as '[t]he first faculty of the Irish', since it could be harnessed to empower patriotism, to 'keep up spirits, refine tastes, warm courage, increase union, and renew

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<sup>87</sup> Dezell, *Irish America: Coming into Clover*, p. 15.

<sup>88</sup> J. S. Bratton, *The Victorian Popular Ballad* (New Jersey: Rowman, Littlefield, 1975), p. 156.

<sup>89</sup> Pádraig Pearse, *Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Pheonix, 1922), p. 66.

<sup>90</sup> Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 516, 569.

zeal.<sup>91</sup> To this end, Davis wrote 'A Nation Once Again', to exhort the Irish to patriotic action. It remains in the popular repertoire as a 'rebel song', exemplifying how Davis inverted the colonial stereotype of the Irishman as a treacherous ruffian, depicting in its place the righteous patriot, who must heed the voice of God's angel, put aside 'passions vain and lowly' to make 'our land/ A Nation once again!'. The 'rebel song' tradition trades in themes of bold heroes, martyrdom induced by the British, and further expressions of patriotic fervour with Davis's heroic figure providing a masculine model fit to assume the role of leadership and instigate military action.

In *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt associates revolutionary sentiment with the notion of alcoholic failure readily. He presents rebel music as a fundamental part of traditional Irish identity, reflecting the political and colonial aspects of Irish history. While he implies that songs of rebellion are a way for his father's generation to find utterance, by presenting such ballads through the voice of the subaltern (his inebriate father) McCourt defangs any trace of militant nationalism. Whether he is aware or not, McCourt exemplifies a version of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concern with recovering subaltern agency and 'voice' in history, which she claims cannot be retrieved.<sup>92</sup> In McCourt's father's case, he is a figurative subaltern whose voice McCourt purports to represent through the alternative source of the rebel ballad. Of course, this standpoint frees McCourt from any obligation to act in support of such ideas, yet as a memoirist, McCourt's own connection with the rebels of republican balladry implicitly promises a life worth remembering, full of self-sacrificing bravery and willingness to overturn existing hierarchies and political injustices.

McCourt's representation of his father's character illustrates how the identity of the singer can affect the listener's appreciation and understanding of the song. While McCourt foregrounds his father's flaw as a deplorable Irish trait, encompassing a

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<sup>91</sup>Thomas Osborne Davis, cited by Francis O'Neill in, *The Dance Music of Ireland: 1001 Gems* (Dublin: Waltons, 1965[1907]), p. 3.

Also see, Arthur Griffith, *Thomas Davis, The Thinker and Teacher* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1922).

<sup>92</sup> See Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', pp. 271-313.

demeaning portrait of what his drunkenness engenders, McCourt is also demonstrating an understanding of the ambiguities of Irish music. In doing so, he exemplifies David Lloyd's term 'adulteration', which not only describes aptly the effect of juxtaposing rebel ballad renditions with alcoholic failure but also foregrounds the ambivalent and diverse tones and forms within the performances of nineteenth-century Irish street ballads. Lloyd argues that nationalist songs are produced self-consciously as commodities, thereby achieving an effect akin to montage in which an heterogeneous and hybridised culture is apparent. Indeed, the pleasure of the street ballad is political and lies in its use of 'extravagant allegories' that characterise the colonized society, while serving to normalise that society. Lloyd notes the socio-political nature of 'The Croppy Boy' and its incorporation of hybrid elements typical of other Irish folk songs, observing in particular the high incidence of songs celebrating the 1798 uprising and a range of rebel heroes: 'At the stylistic level, the street ballads at moments provide an even more intimate register of the processes of cultural hybridisation. They are, most often, adaptations of traditional airs to English words, enforcing frequently a distortion of standard English pronunciation or syntax to fit Gaelic musical and speech rhythms.'<sup>93</sup> Lloyd argues that this creates a unique multivocality that is at odds with nationalist ballads that espouse a 'unisonance', or univocality of one language, culture, and message.

This notion of corruption is exemplified in McCourt's father's version of 'The West's Awake', (the aforementioned young Ireland founder, Thomas Osborne Davis's famous and passionate anthem that refers to the 1798 rebellion), which renders a crude portrait of Irish political history, since McCourt's father severs the song from its historical links by his often-inebriate state (pp.22,122). Malachy McCourt Snr. fails to lend any credibility to the political opinions that the lyrics express, yet bringing to life

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<sup>93</sup>Lloyd, 'Adulteration and the Nation', in David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 88-124 (pp. 93-94, 99).

J.D. Barter's metaphor of 'rousing into consciousness' that which is 'summed up in the tropes of slumber.'<sup>94</sup>

But hark! A voice like thunder spake  
'The West's awake! The West's awake!  
Sing, Oh hurrah, let England quake,  
We'll watch till death for Erin's sake! (p.122).

McCourt's father's lachrymose renditions highlight his Republican sympathies, which are most clearly revealed when he has drunk the 'dole money', and with 'the whisky smell on him', he encourages the absorption of music that relates to Ireland's struggle for independence (pp.22,237). McCourt deploys rebel songs as leit-motifs, drawing upon Wagner's principle to achieve structural unity in introducing and then repeating certain themes or emotions that are associated with his father's alcoholism.<sup>95</sup> McCourt recounts episodes in both Limerick and New York, of his father drinking their meagre income while the family supposedly starved. In recalling his father through anecdotal evidence provided by song, McCourt is using music as a framing device to present serious socio-cultural issues. Autobiographical memory is reconstructed as an evolving process of past history to become a personal representation of specific events and personal facts. Thus, when he recalls his father's obsessive performance of songs of resistance against English oppression, McCourt is able to evoke the omnipresence of the past and to resurrect a snapshot of episodes, anchoring his portrayal within specific concrete and sensory detail, conveying exact circumstances to make incidents more accurate and believable. His father's behaviour is ritualistic and McCourt establishes the time of circumstances that correspond with his father's drinking:

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<sup>94</sup>'The West's Awake', also known as 'The West's Asleep', written by Thomas Osborne Davis (1814-1845) who also wrote 'A Nation Once Again.' (Own knowledge from oral history.) Also see J. D. Barter, 'The Difference That Makes The Difference: Identity Formation in Nineteenth-Century Ireland', Research paper funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Government of Ireland Scholarship, 2001, pp. 7-17 (p. 7).

<sup>95</sup>See, Klaus Reichert, 'The European Background of Joyce's Writing', in *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, ed. by Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 73-77 (pp. 76-77). Joyce also borrows Wagner's technique of using a certain melody, chord, rhythm or instrument to encourage the audience to associate that sound with different themes or characters.

The darkness comes down and the lights come on along Classon Avenue. Other men with jobs are home and having eggs for dinner because you can't have meat on Friday. [...] Down the hall Bing Crosby is singing on the radio, Brother, can you spare a dime? [...] We know Mam won't sing Anyone can see why I wanted your kiss. She sits at the kitchen table talking to herself, What am I going to do? till its late and Dad rolls up the stairs singing Roddy McCorley (p.17).

For the reader, a sense of intimacy and immediacy is educed. As well as providing sound and verisimilitude, these references dictate the phrasing, rhythm and emphasis of McCourt's written word, and the pacing of the action becomes more firmly established. These images become autobiographical memory through McCourt's personal experience, and the graphic illustration that he has called his 'ingredients' fashion what Eakin calls 'fictions of self' derived from 'psychological verisimilitude.'<sup>96</sup> Thus, the relationship between music and memoir aids McCourt's attempt to confront and understand that one of the reasons that the family suffered dire poverty and economic and social loss is because his father 'chose the bottle over the babies.'<sup>97</sup>

McCourt seeks to align his life experience with that of historical figures by showcasing two particular revolutionary ballads that his father sings to rekindle national fervour against British rule. The ballad 'Kevin Barry' commemorates the eighteen-year-old medical student, Barry's courage when on 20 September 1920 he participated in ambushing a lorry carrying British soldiers, three of whom were killed in the ensuing gunfight.<sup>98</sup> In the face of torture he refused to inform on his comrades, even though it would cost Barry his life, and he was hanged for murder at Mountjoy Prison on 1 November 1920. Barry's execution was used by Sinn Féin to arouse anti-British sentiment, and many young students joined the Irish Republican Army as a result of his 'martyrdom'. The song in honour of Barry's fate became one of the most enduring songs to emerge from the Irish War of Independence. In both New York and Limerick

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<sup>96</sup> McCourt, audio recording of John Hersey Memorial Lecture, 'The Truth of Our Lives', The Key West Literary Seminar on *The Memoir*, Disc 1, 13 January 2000. McCourt also refers to 'ingredients' in *Teacher Man*, p. 246.

Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 5, 1.

<sup>97</sup> *Tis*, pp. 115, 274-275.

<sup>98</sup> 'Kevin Barry', author unknown.

McCourt remembers that his father sings 'Kevin Barry' if he is 'falling down drunk' and 'gets us out of bed, lines us up and makes us promise to die for Ireland.' McCourt recalls his father's frequent cry of: 'Where are my troops? Where are my four warriors? [...] Up boys, up. A nickel for everyone who promises to die for Ireland' (pp.18, 103) [...] 'All together we sing 'Kevin Barry':

On Mountjoy one Monday morning,  
High upon the gallows tree,  
Kevin Barry gave his young life  
For the cause of liberty[...] (p.36).

McCourt is suggesting that the ritualistic drill that he and his brothers perform is reminiscent, for his father, of Kevin Barry 'proudly standing to attention/while he bade his last farewell/to his broken hearted mother/whose grief no one can tell', as we are told in the song. As Georges Zimmermann contends: 'The mother is often a patriot heroine herself, proud of her son and accepting the sacrifice she has to offer' (the antithesis of Angela McCourt's need for 'food on the table' rather than 'suffering Ireland'); and meeting death with a smile seems to be the 'essential trait of the rebel.'<sup>99</sup> Yet, Angela McCourt realises the pettiness of patriotism compared to the actual hunger that her children suffer on a daily basis. Even though the young Frankie McCourt masks the critical distance by presenting this song from the viewpoint of a confused and overwhelmed child, the theme of martyrdom is apparent. Kevin Barry is eulogised for his youth ('Just a lad of eighteen summers'), despite which he became an active fighter in the cause for Irish Freedom. Although the situations described are real enough, the lyrics resort typically to romantic rhetoric. As the adult memoirist, McCourt avoids any direct revolutionary statement and omits the inflammatory lines of the last verse ('Another martyr for old Ireland, Another murder for the crown). Similarly he omits the line that might resonate the most with Irish nationalists: 'Shoot me like a soldier, do not hang me like a dog', in favour of undercutting his father's performance

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<sup>99</sup> Georges Denis Zimmermann, *Sons of Irish Rebellion: Irish Political Street Ballads and Rebel Songs, 1780-1900* (Geneva: Imprimerie La Sirè, 1996) and (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), pp. 67, 70. McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*, p. 15.

for comic effect: 'Priests and masters tell us Confirmation means [you're entitled] to die and be a martyr [...] I want to tell them I won't be able to die for the Faith because I'm already booked to die for Ireland' (p.211). It is small wonder that McCourt is enthralled by the 'American' music he hears on Mrs Purcell's radio and undertakes a quest for an distinctive style that repudiates having to be 'Irish'.

Yet, through presenting only fragments of melody McCourt illustrates further the vagueness and ambiguity of what he hears. Although aware that his father gravitates towards men whom he regards as possessing strength, the young McCourt's confusion is augmented when he learns that his father never allows him to learn that the Irish committed atrocities: 'Mr O'Halloran can't lie. He's the headmaster. All these years we were told the Irish were always noble and they made brave speeches before the English hanged them. Now Hoppy O'Halloran is saying the Irish did bad things. Next thing he'll be saying the English did good things' (p.236). Through the voice of the perplexed child, McCourt is illustrating how music can act as an ideological verbal discourse, functioning as something other than itself and becoming a signifier of political aspirations. By presenting music that is dedicated to martyred figures McCourt substantiates how songs educate about political history.

If McCourt's father has 'only the price of a pint or two', he sings 'Roddy McCorley' to memorialise the Irish revolutionary who fought for Irish sovereignty against Britain in 1798.<sup>100</sup> For McCourt's father, this song invokes an affinity with Toome his birthplace, and the place of McCorley's execution, thereby forming a connection with both landscape and identity, as well as the obvious political associations. McCourt recalls his own response: 'I know it's my father because he's the only one in Limerick who sings that song from the North' (pp.103,122):

Up the narrow street he stepped  
Smiling and proud and young  
About the hemp-rope on his neck

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<sup>100</sup>'Roddy McCorley', written by Ethna Carbert, published 1904, <irishmusicdaily.com> [accessed 22 February 2015].

The golden ringlets clung  
There's never a tear in the blue eyes  
Both glad and bright are they,  
As Roddy McCorley goes to die  
On the bridge of Toome today (p.22).

While the words 'golden ringlets' accentuate McCorley's youth, his bravery is also emphasised. The plaintive narrative is reiterated at the end of each verse as the sentiment is affirmed with a substituted word ('For Roddy McCorley goes to die'; 'As Roddy McCorley goes to die'; 'But Roddy McCorley goes to die'), while the last verse ends with ('And Roddy McCorley goes to die on the bridge of Toome today'). McCourt claims that his father wants his own sons to be ready to seize the same sacrificial ideology, since these are the virtues and values that define 'Irishness' for him. While paying tribute to fallen Irish heroes, the common thread of these rebel songs are emotive themes evoking sentiments of solidarity, patriotism and loyalty, which to McCourt's father are desirable traits. However, if qualities of masculine authority and leadership are embedded within rebel music, ironically McCourt's father rejects these attributes. Though weak and ineffectual, Malachy McCourt masks his paternal impotence and profound failure as a man, by clinging to the charismatic leaders of the past. Furthermore, he is left in the wake of a society whose national spirit had been broken by centuries of oppression and poverty, which he perpetuates through drinking.

In using this song in honour of Roddy McCorley's fate in an ambiguous way, McCourt subtly critiques political and cultural solidarity and reiterates that Ulster nationalists like his father never accepted British rule over their province. McCourt makes clear that his father's need for a role model is indicated in songs that present a sombre vision of Ireland. As an Irish patriot, McCourt's father confines himself to the myth of Cuchulain to emphasise the Gaelic heritage of independent Ireland (p.13). Foster defines such sentiment as a Gaelicisation of the 'new state [...] where Irish history is to inculcate national pride and self-respect.'<sup>101</sup> From McCourt's father's perspective (as depicted by McCourt for a global audience), the hero with whom he can unite is found in these

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<sup>101</sup> Foster, *Modern Ireland*, p. 518.



political and legendary figures, illustrating that identity can be equated through song. His world is dichotomised, however, and he presents himself as the eternal victim since he can only view life through the poles of victims and villains, saviours and persecutors. However, his rhetoric is empty and McCourt implies that his father's righteous thoughts are dispelled through irresponsible actions, which suggest that his 'father's songs' unleash the physical sensation of being hungry for McCourt: 'It's bad enough to drink the dole or the wages but a man that drinks the money for a new baby is going beyond the beyonds as my mother would say' (p.210).

In Limerick McCourt's father is in the unfortunate position of being a partisan Irish nationalist yet suspected of being Anglophile. His fate of being born Catholic in the North of Ireland is met with suspicion in *Angela's Ashes* by McCourt's grandmother who accuses him of having 'the odd manner' that taints him 'Presbyterian (p.142).' Furthermore, he is discriminated against in employment and ridiculed for his Antrim accent: 'Dad goes to the Labour Exchange for the dole. There is no hope of a labouring man with a North of Ireland accent getting a job in Limerick (p.63).' Ironically, anti-British activism had caused McCourt's father to flee to America since for some 'desperate act he wound up a fugitive with a price on his head' claiming to have fought with the 'old IRA', which was active throughout the years 1919-1923 (p.2). Therefore, although he shuns his responsibilities, McCourt's father is the victim of a pernicious prejudice, and he appears to use patriotic songs as an attempt to establish national identity regarding himself as a mythological figure because of his perceived 'heroic' deeds on behalf of the IRA. However, he remains a constant victim of bigotry and rejection and never integrates into Limerick society.

This situation implies that not everyone residing on the Island of Ireland is 'Irish' in the same way, to the same extent or with the same validity. According to his grandmother, McCourt inherits the prejudices that accompany his father's pariah status and association with the "bad" part of Ireland: 'That's that North of Ireland hair you got from your father [...] the kind of hair you see on Presbyterians. If your mother had

married a proper decent Limerickman you wouldn't have this standing up, North of Ireland, Presbyterian hair' (p.142). McCourt proposes that the only way that his father can attempt to subvert his outcast position is through insisting on the unwarranted self-esteem implicit in respecting sartorial decorum, recalling that 'he will never leave the house without collar and tie. A man without collar and tie is a man with no respect for himself' (pp.101-102). McCourt reiterated his father's obsession in a conversation with Talk show host, Allan Gregg, saying: 'My father's act was to put on his collar and tie every day and never show he was poor.'<sup>102</sup> Thus, McCourt's father claims a dignity that his day-to-day actions do not match.

The Clancys' regular performances of 'Kevin Barry' and 'Roddy McCorley' exemplify the duality of music and its ability to evoke both a nostalgic reaction in the individual and to engender community appeal. Yet, apart from being invested with a shared symbolic significance, both songs are testimony to music as a political instrument, thereby illustrating Lloyd's contention that such songs become adulterated by commercialism.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, The Clancys' commercialisation of these rebel ballads paved the way for McCourt to do exactly the same but in a more mocking way. Furthermore, McCourt seeks to appropriate The Clancys' music to not only demonstrate the causal link between the ensuing emotional experiences, but also to illustrate how 'Irish' music assumes and promotes an essential connection between people and place. While McCourt is selectively re-remembering events, these ciphers function metonymically to represent the feelings of an entire generation at the time that the rebel songs were composed. Thus, they become the equivalent of a football chant in terms of cementing group identity since they express the current, collective situation of those singing them. Gustave Le Bon explains the two processes that define the homogeneous behaviour of a crowd. In the first instance crowd members imitate each other. Secondly, a process of 'contagion' results in people behaving collectively in a very

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<sup>102</sup> McCourt, in conversation with Allan Gregg for *TUO Talk Show*, 5 January 1997

<<http://allangregg.tv.o.org/episode/121820/frank-mccourt>> [accessed 22 February 2013].

<sup>103</sup> 'Kevin' Barry, track 8 on *The Clancy Brothers: Best of the Vanguard Years*, B00003W8BV, (2000).

'Roddy McCorley', track 9 on *Irish Songs of Drinking and Rebellion*, Bescol Ltd., B001GPBY94, (2006).

different manner from how they would usually behave individually, thereby loosening their usual restraint as a super-ego forms a 'mental unity'. For Le Bon this process of 'submergence' (loss of self) marks the transition from individual psychology to crowd psychology, because collective will always overpowers that of the individual.<sup>104</sup> When scrutinising McCourt's memories from Le Bon's perspective, we can see how McCourt's re-presentation of his father's version of Irish history creates a meaning that may not be commensurate with historical reality, given that his father equates personal history with national narrative.

## **Conclusion**

I conclude this chapter by taking inspiration from Derek Attridge to argue that McCourt is intent upon creating an original model with which to articulate the multifaceted strands of his Irish and Irish-American identity. Attridge contends that 'the closer we are to a work's cultural envelope, its time, its place, its class and general situation, of course, the more direct its originality, or lack of it, feeds our response.'<sup>105</sup> For Attridge 'originality' is the key to the reader's enjoyment, and in the case of McCourt's writing, the outcome rests upon his audience's response to the psychological impact and emotional effect that references to music and musical performance has upon the telling of his life. While McCourt aims to stimulate the reader's imagination and capacity for visualisation, it is an onerous task to capture in words those emotions that are created without language. Emotion is the psychological response to a certain stimulus and sensual imprints stay with McCourt so that music begins where words end in his experiment to explore how far life-writing can go in combining narrative with the sensory, yet non-verbal experience.

Although a full emotional response to McCourt's musical references can only arise through knowledge of the songs that he foregrounds, he nonetheless succeeds in conveying how music has the power to explore the human condition and reveal latent

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<sup>104</sup>Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1995[1895]), pp. 44, 50, 181.

<sup>105</sup>Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge 2004), p. 41.

feelings. Similarly, his experiences illuminate the social forces that both sustain and inhibit emotions that may have been repressed in the readers' own lives. Furthermore, since McCourt's writing maps the development of consciousness, then the growth of artistic sensibility can be claimed firmly to be part of that process. As Roy Pascal has said:

Through [life-writing] both the writers and the readers know life. It is not necessarily or primarily an intellectual or scientific knowledge but a knowing through the imagination, a sudden grasp of reality through reliving it in the imagination, an understanding of the feel of life.<sup>106</sup>

Aside from the notion of the 'feel of life', McCourt's use of music references and musical performance also impose a correlation of socio-historical facts. They are soundtracks that can be used in a similar way to how geographers like Adam Krimms explore the intersection of music and geography. In this context soundtracks serve as a fundamental determinant around identity and the creation of boundaries, borders and regions. This approach not only challenges our fascination with the visual at the expense of a sonic experience of the world but also underpins many modes of human communication as well as the performing rituals of place and space.<sup>107</sup>

This chapter has emphasised the crucial role that urban centres like New York, Boston and Chicago played in the formation and growth of an 'Irish' music community in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when McCourt's space for socialising and music making with The Clancy Brothers was New York's Greenwich Village. His interaction with them not only cements the historical context of *'Tis* but also allows the reader to encounter how 'traditional' Irish music was a valuable tool for expression, communication and admission to groups, particularly in a centre of migration like New York. Indeed, Bohlman's argument that various sounds and spaces assist our attempt to understand the processes of migration can be applied in an Irish context. As Bohlman says, 'Changing [t]he geographic basis of folk music has not disappeared, but it has effectively migrated from rural to urban models, from simple to complex

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<sup>106</sup> Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, p. 185.

<sup>107</sup> Adam Krimms, *Music and Urban Geography* (London: Routledge, 2007).

settings. Here, new boundaries arise; the influences on musical genres are greater, but no urban musical grayout is in sight.<sup>108</sup> Bohlman's idea exemplifies how the movement of Irish traditional music from west to east and thence to a global progression (particularly from rural to urban settings) was part of the development of folk music. In addition, we are able to appreciate the significance of musical culture in creating and maintaining social networks and kinship links in migration destinations and how music is one means through which such relations are established, maintained and transformed.

McCourt recounts the exploits of Roddy McCorley and Kevin Barry by fusing song and story to frame a conversation with the reader in which the conflicting emotions of sadness and joy, hope and disappointment, pathos and conviviality are evoked. Marcel Proust explains the theory of art that is embedded in the author's narrative with particular emphasis on the relation of writer to reader as a 'translator' of the reader's own thoughts: '[W]hat we call reality is a certain connection between these immediate sensations and the memories which envelop us simultaneously with them [...]. [E]very reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self.'<sup>109</sup> Yet, resonance for some of McCourt's Irish audience might arise because the rebel songs that he associates with his father impart the English as the face of infamy, conquest and oppression. Moreover, McCourt offers a cue to either the explicit or implicit recall of fragments of the reader's personal autobiographical memory, becoming a vehicle for an aesthetic response to McCourt's own experience. By interweaving musical elements subtly, McCourt encourages the reader to make an identification by promoting emotional memories in a form that Thomas Scheff calls 'the best aesthetic distance', because it facilitates catharsis.<sup>110</sup> According to Scheff, painful memories are made pleasurable because the reader experiences intense emotions from a safe distance. When Scheff's

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<sup>108</sup> Bohlman, *Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 67.

<sup>109</sup> Marcel Proust, *A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu (Remembrance of Things Past)*, Vol. III, *Time Regained*, trans. by C.K. Scott-Moncrief, et al (London: Penguin, 1954), pp. 924-949.

<sup>110</sup> Thomas Scheff, *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 59.

theory is applied to McCourt's writing, the reader becomes emotionally involved to a point where they forget that they are also observers. As Scheff says: 'Aesthetic distance may be defined as the simultaneous and equal experience of being both participant and observer. Part of the person's attention is in the past, absorbed in reliving a distressful experience that has been re-stimulated by the present context; however, part of the person's attention is also in the present, realizing that there is no real threat.'<sup>111</sup> As this chapter has proved, McCourt combines text and music for the purpose of intensifying the reader's emotional response.

McCourt's references to jazz create yet another legible sub-text. He succeeds in using language and dialogue to reproduce the eclectic sounds of brass, clarinet and saxophone, along with the accelerating call-and-response sounds between the horn sections that shaped American popular music from the early twentieth century to the Tin-Pan-Alley-created 'Irish' melodies that became an expression of Irish-American identity. However, despite this fusion, he is unable to attain cultural equity and fashion himself as purely American despite his love of jazz and his appropriation of its idioms. As Anaïs Nin has said: 'We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospection [...] We write to be able to transcend our life, to reach beyond it.'<sup>112</sup> In view of McCourt's detailed and raw account, this credo can also be applied to the reader. In essence, McCourt writes for both an initiated and an uninformed audience.

Gerry Smyth's thoughts stand as an explanation of why McCourt experiments with music's integral relationship with memoir and how they are bound into an interpretive framework for the synthesis of expression: 'Music impinges significantly upon our aural negotiation of the world, providing us with some of the most accessible means to make sense of that strangest of human adventures: life.'<sup>113</sup> Through life-writing, McCourt stresses that music is part of his strategy for achieving verisimilitude, particularly as

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<sup>111</sup> Scheff, *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama*, p. 57

<sup>112</sup> Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*, Vol. 5, quoted in *Woman as Writer*, ed. by Jeannette L. Webber and Joan Grumman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 38.

<sup>113</sup> Gerry Smyth, *Noisy Ireland: A Short History of Irish Popular Music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2005), p. 136.

Irish composition reproduces the rhythms and lyricism of the spoken word, and its reception may replicate the ebbs and flows of lived experience. The textual examples in this chapter ascertain the complicated linguistic structures and narrative techniques that are at work, while McCourt's methodology exposes the psychoanalytical dimension involved in the re-creation of his characters, thereby establishing music as a crucial text in itself. It becomes a surrogate language; a fundamental dialogue of communication that conveys McCourt's psychological state. By paying close attention to the nuances of the musical elements the reader gains a more direct access to the social and pedagogical milieu that McCourt recalls. His narrative strategy bears witness that the writer does not have to follow established storylines and that he can break away by using music to express profound emotions since the imagery evoked is intense and often detailed.

Ultimately for McCourt, music exerts a powerful ability to instigate and document social change. He determines that songs can be a significant means of communicating historical events and political sentiments as well as a conscious juxtapositioning of music and the themes of his memoir trilogy. McCourt appropriates Dylan's lyrics as an innovative way to 'analyse, categorize and finalise' the retelling of how his own Irish-American experience has been subject to the diverse influences upon the sonic portrait of New York City.<sup>114</sup> McCourt's assertion, 'I'd like to be Irish when its time for a song', confirms music as his means of capturing past experience, his heritage and the pull of his forebears.<sup>115</sup> Thus, we have seen how McCourt's use of musical references exemplifies how social constructions of the past offer alternative views that may themselves become part of the collective memory.

This chapter has analysed how, in Merriman's terms, McCourt deploys musical references and allusions to musical performances to confirm or challenge stereotypes. I

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<sup>114</sup> See Bob Dylan, *Lyrics 1962-1985* (New York: Alfred A. Knop, 1985), p. 129. Quote adapted from Dylan's song 'All I Really Want to Do' ('I ain't looking to block you up/Shock or knock or lock you up, /Analyse you, categorise you, /Finalise or advertise you.'). released on Columbia records, CS 8993 (1964).

<sup>115</sup> *Tis*, p. 279.

have also provided proof that music functions in McCourt's writing to illuminate the conflict between his Irish and Irish-American identity. In addition, I have revealed how, in Cleary's terms McCourt challenges his audience to confront the 'dark side of their historical past', and considered the effect that the music citations have upon his audience/readership. Yet, we have seen how McCourt seeks cannily to defang his writing from any overt political comment. I turn to Cleary in the next chapter, reshaping and extending his contention that McCourt undertakes an 'unqualified embrace of America as the land of opportunity' to clarify further why the allure of 'America' becomes more pressing for him.<sup>116</sup> In the same context I apply Cleary's statement that 'the simulacra of escape which is cinema itself is the only "escape" that remains', to analyse McCourt's conflicting hybrid identity, and to expose how he deploys filmic references and images as key structural devices to recall specific incidents that he purports to have experienced.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, pp. 290, 231.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.



### Chapter 3

#### **'Are ye Gangsters or Cowboys? [...] Fred Astaire How Are You?': The effect of Hollywood Cinema on Frank McCourt's Irish-American Male Identity.'**<sup>1</sup>

*'The movies [...] That's what America would feel like.'*<sup>2</sup>

This chapter makes the case that in *Angela's Ashes* in particular, the celluloid images of 'America' that Frank McCourt absorbs from 'the silver screen', sustain him throughout his childhood by providing a means of escape from the dystopic reality of Limerick. I scrutinise how McCourt's synthesis of memories become subsumed into the dominant culture of popular Hollywood movies of the era, so that the 1930s/1940s Ireland reimagined by McCourt exposes the uneasy alliance of Church, State and Irish culture. McCourt uses the term 'America' (rather than the politically correct term United States of America) as a metaphor for New York: the destination to which particular screen pictures strengthen his resolve to return, since that city is the realm of modernity and liberty and stands as the capital of these aspirations.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, McCourt appeals to his American audience by portraying himself as a displaced 'American' who is forced to live in Ireland throughout his formative years. As he says in *'Tis*: 'There are reasons for the hangdog look: I was born in New York and taken to Ireland when I was four.'<sup>4</sup> McCourt's statement is a deliberate appeal to his American audience since it alerts readers to his family's voyage 'back' to Limerick from New York. He states explicitly in *Angela's Ashes* that Ireland is a place to leave, and his quest to return to New York in search of material comfort allows McCourt to distance himself further from the present by the melding of denunciation and reminiscence. This attests to the fact that McCourt's representation of Ireland in his writing has been influenced by his subsequent life in America.

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<sup>1</sup> *Angela's Ashes*, pp. 83, 159.

<sup>2</sup> O'Faolain, *Almost There: The Onward Journey of a Dublin Woman*, p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> 'America' is used throughout in the same way that McCourt employs the term, even though he is concerned solely with New York.

<sup>4</sup> *'Tis*, p. 25. McCourt is trapped by his complex blend of heritages so that his loyalties are mixed and, to some extent, fractured.

McCourt's memory hangs on an entire era that is haunted by Hollywood star personas, and I analyse how he succumbs to what Cleary calls a 'colonization of the subconscious by Hollywood' because the 'whole narrative grammar of popular cinema is essentially American.'<sup>5</sup> I establish how McCourt deploys 'fantasy' figures associated with the matinee heroes John Wayne, James Cagney and Fred Astaire as part of a tripartite framework of references; namely the Western hero, the 'hoodlum' and the dancer. The establishment of this particular signifying framework is driven by McCourt's fascination with how Limerick's cinemas feature Wayne, Cagney and Astaire dancing and shooting their way to fame and fortune. I establish how these three stars provide a cultural script that revives McCourt's memory about specific events like his First Communion Day (p.141). The structure of this chapter is a three-part analysis: the first explores McCourt's identification of Wayne with a specific 'brand' of American masculinity; the second examines the potency of Cagney as a cultural reference for a heightened version of Irish-American masculinity; and the third analyses the cinematic significance of Astaire's star image as a style icon. An audible and visible 'American' identity becomes accessible to McCourt through Hollywood's projection of Astaire's urbane sophistication, Wayne's laconicism and Cagney's New York dialect, which makes him an influential figure of ethnic identification for McCourt, even though Hollywood's utopianism ensured that Cagney's accent lost its specific class coding in Ireland and became, generalised as merely "American".<sup>6</sup> It is useful at this point to recall Greenblatt's notion of self-fashioning to assess how McCourt uses his childhood obsession with the cinema and these particular stars for the self-conscious fashioning of his own image, which he sets against the ideological traits portraying masculinity.

The guise that McCourt affords himself is set in opposition to the interconnecting personae of the aforementioned paradigmatic stars, allowing him to engage in particular ways with issues of ethnicity, gender, class, male vulnerability and sexuality.

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<sup>5</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 190.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), p. 39.

I assess how each of these matinee idols provide a crucial understanding of what constitutes a sexually potent Irish-American male identity for McCourt for whom a predominant trope in *Tis* is the encounter between Irish masculinity and American femininity. My analysis exposes how McCourt's absorption of the themes and *mise-en-scène* of the Western, Gangster and Musical genres become vehicles for him to position the female as an object of desire, particularly as American popular culture expresses freedom and an escape from repressive Catholic dogma. Wayne, Cagney and Astaire help to elucidate McCourt's use of cinema as an expression of the unquantifiable nature of his own Irish identity in relation to the Hollywood film star, particularly as stardom means "authentically American" to McCourt. The issue of authenticity brings to the forefront Foster's criticism that *Angela's Ashes* is constructed with little regard for verisimilitude. In my own discussion with McCourt — conducted with the writer before his death in 2009 — he indicated to me his awareness of Foster's critique, acknowledging that it 'brought me a lot of attention.'<sup>7</sup> However, Foster's argument might be nuanced since he himself recognises that *cinematic* references serve as definitive images of McCourt's experience because the characters in *Tis* come 'straight from central casting' with a 'paedophile priest, angry-but-noble-Communist, saintly and paternal black ware-houseman.'<sup>8</sup> Through this reasoning Foster is himself acknowledging that the particular fictive constructions that McCourt deploys are actually familiar from the cinema. He also recognises in McCourt's writing that 'the new, modernized, liberated Irish consciousness feels a sneaking nostalgia for the verities of the old victim-culture.'<sup>9</sup> This 'nostalgia' has proved marketable for McCourt who, as I confirm, is acquainted with how it has been consciously expressed in film.

The young Frankie McCourt of *Angela's Ashes* is sufficiently seduced by the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s to transpose imaginatively filmic fictions into daily routines, and the spectator experience becomes part of his habitual existence.

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<sup>7</sup> Personal email from Frank McCourt, 17 December 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Foster, 'Selling Irish Childhoods: Frank McCourt and Gerry Adams', p. 170.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.

McCourt's regular exposure to genre films is illustrated succinctly when he truants from Irish dancing class and spends his tuition fee ('the sixpence') at the Lyric Cinema: 'Next week it's a George Raft film and the week after that a cowboy film with George O'Brien. Then it's James Cagney' (p.160). For McCourt, cinema is an art geared towards entertainment rather than an industry; albeit an industry that he witnessed develop and reach the apotheosis of its popularity. According to Ross McKibbin, working-class and lower-middle class spectators in the United Kingdom were the greatest cinemagoers throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The drastic drop in cinema admission figures in the United Kingdom and the United States from 1950 coincided with the advent of television.<sup>10</sup> Although spectator figures for Limerick and Southern Ireland in general, are unavailable for the 1930s and 1940s, Martin McCloone argues that it might be better to see 1930s-1960s Hollywood not as an American cinema but rather as an Irish national cinema. He contends that Hollywood's diverse influences and its 'democratic address' provided Irish audiences with 'real pleasures' in escaping their own restrictive national culture which was dominated by an 'overbearing censorious Catholicism.'<sup>11</sup> A fine distinction can be made between McCourt's own audience and that of the cinema in terms of consumption, manipulation, identification and ideology. The commercial and social contexts of production and consumption of the written word produces a different kind of aesthetic experience for the spectator. McCourt has had to conceptualise his audience, and the success of his writing is aided by their recognition of and identification with his experience. McCourt fuses the influences of these differing artistic mediums to exhibit a profound awareness that both memoir and cinema are channels for subjectivity, since they restructure and revise memory.

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<sup>10</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998), p. 419. The fall in spectator figures in Limerick would have been slower because Irish television was not launched until 1961. I am grateful to Archivist, Michael Maguire, for this information.

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Grant, Archivist at the Irish Film Institute told me in an email communication that she had been unable to find any information relating to the Irish box office figures in any of the Library's resources. See Martin McCloone, 'National Cinema and Global Culture: The Case of Irish Cinema', in *Cinemas of Ireland*, ed. by Isabelle le Corff and Estelle Epinoux (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 14-27 (p. 18).

McCourt demonstrates in *Teacher Man* that the cinema is a Limerick institution through his admission that 'our heads were filled with American trash from the Lyric Cinema.'<sup>12</sup> In an interview he describes the Lyric as being his 'window on the world' through which he would gaze on Saturday afternoons to see 'Fred dancing and [...] Cagney going to jail and into the execution chamber. So we knew we were going to get out [of Limerick]. That was our dream.'<sup>13</sup> McCourt's sentimental recollection reiterates the way that alternative worlds are constructed in his writing through matinee heroes whose screen personae are made significant enough for him to utilise as an escape from the misery of 'real' life. Indeed, as David Pritchard argues, 'to McCourt and countless thousands of other deprived Irish children, the movies provided a bridge of light across which they might temporarily escape from the miseries of their day-to-day existence.'<sup>14</sup> The memoir genre allows McCourt to borrow Hollywood's structural metaphor of the 'journey', with New York becoming the destination for his spiritual homecoming.<sup>15</sup> McCourt's cinema-style representation of his first sight of the Manhattan skyline is explored in detail in the final section of this chapter, with particular emphasis on novelist Angela Carter's opinion that Hollywood is 'the capital city of illusion, [...] as if Hollywood itself were its own greatest production.'<sup>16</sup> In Alan Cooke's documentary *Home*, McCourt portrays New York in spiritual terms: 'It's beyond Mecca, it's beyond Lourdes, it's beyond Knock [...] In New York you're always

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<sup>12</sup> *Teacher Man*, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Farnsworth, 'Irish Ashes', transcript of an interview with Frank McCourt, for *On-line Newshour*, 17 March 1997 <[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june97/mccourt\\_3-17.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june97/mccourt_3-17.html)> [accessed 1 May 2008].

<sup>14</sup> David Pritchard, *Through Irish Eyes: A Visual Companion to Angela McCourt's Ireland*, ed. by David Ross (New York: Smithmark Publishers, 1998), p. 54.

Also see, Gabriel Fallon, 'The Celluloid Menace', in *Capuchin Annual* (December 1937), pp. 248-580. Notwithstanding, a total of 1,271 (mostly Hollywood) films were screened in Ireland in 1935 and over 18 million tickets sold in the Free State.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949). Joycean scholar, Campbell, discusses the monomyth of the hero's journey.

Also see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Lakoff and Johnson present a set of metaphorical concepts around which we can conceptualise the world or our worldviews.

<sup>16</sup> Angela Carter, 'Hollywood', in *Shaking A Leg: Journalism and Writings* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), pp. 384-386 (384).

about to discover something and I think sometimes it's your own soul.'<sup>17</sup> McCourt is suggesting that his immigrant journey through the myth and mystery of New York became a voyage of inner perception, and one that enabled him to write.

Annette Kuhn contends that in the 1930s, cinema going 'appears to have been less about particular films, or even films in general, than about experiences surrounding the activity of going to the pictures.'<sup>18</sup> In *Angela's Ashes* McCourt implies that going to the 'Picture Palace' was a routine Limerick activity. He expresses how the venues match the spectator's social class and level of affluence, naming the Lyric, Coliseum, Carlton, Atheneum and Central cinemas and contending that a 'better class of people' is to be met at the Savoy, 'the fanciest of them all' (p.287). McCourt contrasts the 'lower classes that fill the tuppenny seats in the gods at the Lyric Cinema and are never done shouting at the screen', while spectators at the Savoy pay sixpence for a seat 'down front', eat boxes of chocolates but cover their mouths when they laugh (pp.246, 367). In New York, the Sixty-Eighth Street Playhouse is the venue that McCourt frequents most often because of its proximity to his furnished room.<sup>19</sup> It is obvious to McCourt that this venue 'isn't a bit like Limerick's Lyric Cinema where you could bring in fish and chips or a good feed of pig's feet and a bottle of stout if the humor was on you.'<sup>20</sup> This wording is itself taken from cinema since the song 'The Humour Is On Me Now' features in John Ford's 1952 film, *The Quiet Man*.<sup>21</sup> Despite these disparate venues, McCourt would still experience what Maltby and Craven regard as cinema's effective framing devices: 'From the entrance lobby to the dimming of the lights [...] the building is designed to cut us off from the world outside, and propel us into the alternative

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<sup>17</sup>*Home*, film documentary, produced and directed by Dawn Scibilia, written and narrated by Alan Cooke, Home Film Company (2007).

<sup>18</sup>Annette Kuhn, 'Cinema-Going in Britain in the 1930s: Report of a Questionnaire Survey', in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 19 (4), (1999), pp. 531-543 (p. 539). Also see, Richard Maltby, *et al*, eds., *Going To The Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of the Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008).

<sup>19</sup>*Tis*, p. 14. Frank McCourt answered my query in a personal email, 20 January 2009.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup>'The Humour Is On Me Now', words and music by Richard Hayward, from *The Quiet Man*, directed by John Ford, produced by Herbert J. Yates, Merian C. Cooper and John Ford, Republic Pictures Corporation (1952).

world on the screen.<sup>22</sup> This sentiment proclaims the ability of Hollywood to play with the contrast between realism and fantasy, enabling McCourt to construct a potential world to replace the one he inhabits in reality.

### **John Wayne: The all-American hero**

In *Angela's Ashes* McCourt recalls being forced to confront the narrative of identity and communal memory when he arrives in Limerick from New York. The boys in Leamy's school are familiar with both 'Gangster' and 'Western' films and McCourt evokes their attack:

Are ye Yanks [...] Are ye gangsters or cowboys? [...] A big boy sticks his face up to mine [...] I tell him I don't know and when he pokes his finger in my chest Malachy says I'm a gangster, Frank's a cowboy (p.83).

Here we see McCourt's early yet succinct introduction to his sense of fluctuating identity. McCourt expanded on the comic effect of this blending of genres in a 2007 conversation with Sandip Roy: 'We got our knowledge of America through the movies [...] When I was growing up there were two types; Gangster and Westerns. I wanted to go to America so that I could die like Cagney in sing-sing [...] I dreamed of riding around the prairie killing Indians with John Wayne.'<sup>23</sup> Cleary's argument that the 'Wild West of Hollywood legend' engulfs the Irish west in a familiar form of cultural imperialism illuminates how McCourt's identification with cowboys and Indians can be mobilised as an indicator of utopian desire.<sup>24</sup> In *Angela's Ashes* McCourt recalls that despite knowing the schoolboy tradition, schoolmaster Mr Benson views cinema as both the foe of Catholic teaching and as a cultural destabiliser:

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<sup>22</sup> Maltby and Craven, *Hollywood Cinema*, p. 39.

Also see, Carter, 'Robert Coover: A Night at the Movies', in *Shaking A Leg: Journalism and Writings*, pp. 382-384 (p.382). Carter regards the cinema as a 'twentieth century illusion', likening it to 'a dream Cathedral' with 'wish-fulfilment architecture [...] the apotheosis of the fake.' Carter's view has analogies with Walter Benjamin's opinion that architecture represents 'the prototype of a work of art', with buildings having been 'man's companions since primeval times.' See Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 217-251 (p. 240).

<sup>23</sup> McCourt in conversation with Sandip Roy at the Commonwealth Club of California, 28 November 2007 <[http://fora.tv/2007/11/28/Frank\\_McCourt\\_Angela\\_and\\_the\\_Baby\\_Jesus#fullprogram](http://fora.tv/2007/11/28/Frank_McCourt_Angela_and_the_Baby_Jesus#fullprogram)> [accessed 10 August 2009].

<sup>24</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 190.

Our First Communion boys run to wallow in the filth spewed across the world by the devil's henchmen in Hollywood. Isn't that right, McCourt?  
'Tis sir (p.130).

Mr Benson is sure to be aware that the *Limerick Leader* features advertisements for First Holy Communion apparel from stores that adapt their wording and visual advertising style to match columns shared with cinema promotions, thereby juxtaposing and cementing the customary celebration.<sup>25</sup> Mr Benson 'hates America', and singles out McCourt and his brother, Malachy, as 'these two Yanks.' He punishes McCourt for fighting with Heffernan by making McCourt confess 'I'm a bad Yank', yet remonstrates with Heffernan: 'It's not their fault that they're Yanks' (pp.84-85). Mr Benson's attitude substantiates that it was with the cinema in mind that the Catholic Church established religious bodies like the Redemptorist Confraternity, which was particularly strong in Limerick, as McCourt recalls:

Question Quigley tells me I have to go to the Redemptorist church on Friday and join the boys' division [...] You can't say no. All the boys in the lanes and back streets that have fathers on the dole or working in laboring jobs have to join (p.162).

It was expected that the Confraternity would encourage McCourt and his contemporaries to focus on matters more spiritual than Hollywood. As Pritchard contends: 'If religion was the opium of the masses in the drab Ireland of the 1930s and 40s, then cinema was surely their champagne.' Pritchard relates how in 1939 Doctor Magee, Bishop of Down and Connor, railed against the influence of foreign films, claiming that they were a 'danger to the faith and virtue of the young', being 'openly anti-Catholic', possibly as a reaction to Pope Pius XI's declaration that although books were immoral, films were worse. Pritchard outlines how the Church assumed the role of moral guardian by carefully vetting movie publications, books, magazines and newspapers to ensure that reading matter considered immoral by the censors would be eradicated: 'British and American newspapers and magazines were often distributed

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<sup>25</sup>For example, Cannock and Co. Ltd. advertised 'First Communion suits for Boys' in the *Limerick Leader* cinema columns on 28 May 1941, p. 1, c. 1.



with intriguing gaps where offending pages or articles had been removed.<sup>26</sup> This practice is exemplified in McCourt's recollection in *Angela's Ashes* that during his employment at Easons he had to 'tear out page sixteen from *John O'London Weekly*' by order of the Irish Government because it contained information about, 'birth control and that's banned in Ireland' (pp. 408-409). However, rather than destroying this advertisement, McCourt assumes the role of a Gangster from the Hollywood movies and actually steps outside the law by selling the offending page. McCourt's claim that he fashioned himself as a law-breaker to benefit financially from the censored article supports my contention that his work can be nuanced in that it reflects the extent to which he has been influenced by the 'control mechanisms' of Church and State, thereby illustrating succinctly McCourt's condemnation of the oppressive conditions in de Valera's Ireland.

For Maltby and Craven the appeal of the Western lies in 'hierarchies of gestural coding' such as the gunfighter's narrowed eyes, the hero's purposeful stride, and the familiar choreographed saloon brawl.<sup>27</sup> McCourt catalogues these signs in *Life* magazine:

In the old Westerns I watched at the Lyric Cinema, I squirmed with pleasure when the wagon master called 'Move out', [...] and whips cracked [...] The Westerns, classic in form and subject: the lone gunman; noble Indian chiefs, forts attacked. Scalps taken; gun fighter showdowns on Main Street, whiskey knocked back by the bottleful; [...] the heroes in white, the bad guy in black [...] that, for me, is the American story.<sup>28</sup>

These memories suggest that McCourt experienced what Thomas Elsaesser defines as a 'phatic' process, whereby specific codes make the audience aware of the type of cinematic experience they may expect.<sup>29</sup> The most notably projected iconographic backdrop in the Western is John Ford's use of Utah's Monument Valley in *Stagecoach*

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<sup>26</sup> Pritchard, *Through Irish Eyes: A Visual Companion to Angela McCourt's Ireland*, p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> Maltby and Craven, *Hollywood Cinema*, pp. 117-119.

<sup>28</sup> McCourt, 'What Immigration Means to Me', p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Narrative Cinema and Audience-orientated Aesthetics', in *Popular Television and Film* ed. by Tony Bennett, *et al* (London: British Film Institute, 1981), 270-282, (p. 271).

and *The Searchers*.<sup>30</sup> Rick Altman argues that genre films like the Western, the Musical and the Gangster movie depend on *symbolic* usage of key images, sounds and situations. Although Altman believes that it is the very 'concentration derived from simplification that allows cowboys, gangsters, dancers [...] to take on symbolic value so easily and systematically', the Wild West is sometimes mapped onto the Irish west in popular culture.<sup>31</sup> The myth of going west to seek prosperity and freedom correlates to McCourt's dream of New York and his father's lesson that 'it's the land of opportunity. America is not like Limerick, a gray place with a river that kills' (p.238). Such thinking establishes why McCourt draws on this organic connection with the land and represents the west as a 'new frontier' that holds the promise of a true language, folklore, and an unpolluted 'Irish' way of life. To extend Gibbons's examination in Chapter 2 on the ways in which Irish writers have utilised Western themes, he defines the American Western as:

A hymn to individualism, a celebration of self-interest and personal liberty evoked in visual terms by the limitless expanse of the great plains and the vast open prairies [...] quintessentially the expression of the restless individualism which lies at the heart of the American dream.<sup>32</sup>

Wayne embodies these tropes in *Stagecoach*, in which Ford consciously represents the frontier as a place of renewal, where men are allowed to have no past and to start life anew. When I asked McCourt to cast his mind back to films that he saw during his army service, he responded:

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<sup>30</sup> *The Searchers*, directed by John Ford, produced by Merian C. Cooper, Warner Brothers Pictures (1956). *Stagecoach*, directed by John Ford, produced by Walter Wanger, United Artists Corporation (1939). See J. L. Leutrat and S. Liandrat-Guigues, 'John Ford and Monumental Valley', in E. Buscombe and R. Pearson, eds., *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 160-169. Discourses surrounding Wayne concentrate on the fluid movement of his massive frame, suggesting the importance of the visual spectacle and the relationship of his dynamic body to his star status. See for example, Pete Martin, 'The Ladies Like 'Em Rugged', in *Saturday Evening Post*, 23 December 1950, p. 19. Ford often accentuated Wayne's height by situating him next to doorframes. See, Helen Itria, 'Big John', in *Look*, 11 August 1953, pp. 67-71.

<sup>31</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 26. Also see, John Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green Popular University Press, 1970).

<sup>32</sup>Gibbons, 'Synge, Country and Western: The Myth of the West in Irish and American Culture', pp. 23-24, 26. Also see, Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 190.

The only movie I remember seeing on the army base in Germany was *The Quiet Man*. There you go again with John Wayne. It was John Ford's sentimental tribute to the Old Country, all schmaltz and shamrock. Yes, the movies came overseas quickly.<sup>33</sup>

McCourt is reacting to Ford's representation of Ireland as a kind of mental repository for melancholy; a place where he could deposit his fantasies, sadness and mourning. In his life-writing we see how McCourt can identify with Wayne as the Irish-named character Sean Thornton, who lost in the 'wilderness', makes his own destiny. Paradoxically, while being drafted into the American army complicates McCourt's Irish identity, the 'G.I. Bill' becomes the passport to McCourt's teaching career.<sup>34</sup> Certainly in *Teacher Man*, McCourt chooses a Wayne-related reference to explore anxieties about his pedagogical performance, indicating clearly that Wayne's screen persona forms part of his own cultural aspirations as well as his need to tame the frontier wilderness metaphorically: 'I often think I should be a tough, disciplined teacher, organized and focused, a John Wayne of pedagogy, another Irish schoolmaster wielding stick, strap, cane.'<sup>35</sup> Daly and Persky's observations suggest the reasons why McCourt wishes to emulate Wayne's attributes:

The cowboy was, by all means, a man. His masculinity was worn as a badge, his right of entry to the West. Masculinity in Westerns is identified as the only source of stability in a frontier world where the clash of savagery and civilization threatens cultural and social order. What defines masculinity is not physique, good looks, strength, or aggressiveness, but the ability to be tough.<sup>36</sup>

McCourt's favouring of Hollywood's authoritative figures to real Irish 'pompous priests' and 'bullying schoolmasters' anticipates issues raised by the Ferns Inquiry (2005) and the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, otherwise known as the Ryan Report (2009).<sup>37</sup> While toughness is a typical Irish Catholic mode of representation, it adopts a

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<sup>33</sup> Personal email from McCourt, 18 June 2009.

<sup>34</sup> *Tis*, p. 150.

<sup>35</sup> *Teacher Man*, p. 147.

<sup>36</sup> David Daly and Joel Persky, *Journal of the West*, Vol. XXIX, No. 2 (April 1990), 3-64 (p. 29).

Also see Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 2004 [1998]), pp.135, 63-64.

<sup>37</sup> *Angela's Ashes*, p. 1.

sinister connotation in the aftermath of these investigations. For example the Ryan Report has unveiled that aggressive violence often hides a displaced sexuality, which is a depiction far removed from Bing Crosby or Barry Fitzgerald's portrayal of the Irish priest; a gentle and kindly figure in dark clothing rather than a personality hiding dark secrets.<sup>38</sup> McCourt prefers a role model that matches his spectator experience of witnessing Wayne as a symbol of impregnable virility and to become acquainted with Wayne's repertoire of gestures, such as his swaggering walk, the intonation in his distinctive voice, his height and performance style.<sup>39</sup> All these signs draw together Wayne's association with the West and legitimate a certain way of being a man in American society. Conversely, McCourt is indicating that his own self-image is tainted with suggestions of failure when measured against Wayne's heightened physical and emotional strength, which Deborah Thomas defines as a 'profoundly corporeal' male spectacle; a body that is intractable against both the landscape and his enemies.<sup>40</sup> McCourt's particular enemies in *Angela's Ashes* are Declan Collopy at the Confraternity, Catholic priests who refuse to accept him as an altar boy, Sister Rita and Laman Griffin. Of course, he has other 'enemies' in the form of poverty, disease and his father's alcoholism. Thus, McCourt seeks to emulate a hero who is never vindictive in his quest to defend the rights of others against formidable odds, while showing regard for moral authority. Wayne's screen persona is a reassuring presence for McCourt: the personification of a 'real' man.

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Ferns Inquiry to the Minister for Health and Children (Dublin: Government Publications, October, 2005) <<http://www.bishop-accountability.org/ferns/>> [accessed 12 August, 2009].

See The Ryan Report <<http://www.childabusecommission.com/rpt/ExecSummary.php>> [accessed 5 July 2009].

Also see Mary Raftery and Eoin O'Sullivan, *Suffer the Little Children: The Inside Story of Ireland's Industrial Schools* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1999). Raftery's investigation into the ambivalent status of children residing in Ireland's industrial and reformatory schools presents a somber view of provincial life in post-independence Ireland.

Also see, *States of Fear*, RTE, Ireland (April/May 1999). Three episodes, written, produced and directed by Mary Raftery, narrated by Aine Lawlor.

<sup>38</sup>Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald, *Going My Way*, directed by Leo McCarey, produced by B.G. DeSylva, Paramount Pictures Incorporated (1944).

<sup>39</sup> Cinema advertisement for screening of *Stagecoach* at the Lyric Cinema in *Limerick Leader*, 14 December 1940.

<sup>40</sup>Deborah Thomas, 'John Wayne's Body', in, *The Movie Book of the Western*, ed. by Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye (London: Studio Vista, 1996), 75-87 (p. 75).

McCourt seeks a pedagogical profile that is just as self-reliant and one that projects an innate and profound understanding of justice. At the same time, he strives to emulate Wayne's persona. The low-angle shot of Wayne's entrance in *Rio Bravo* provides a noteworthy example of how McCourt as spectator views Wayne as mediated through specific cinematic techniques.<sup>41</sup> Richard Schechner's term 'strips of behaviour' illuminates the way in which McCourt assimilates Wayne's positive attributes as a montage: McCourt replayed and repeated Wayne's movements and actions in the same way that film director treats a strip of film. As a consequence, the image of Wayne becomes re-edited and re-enacted, becoming what Schechner terms 'twice-behaved', whereby actions can be rearranged or reconstructed to create 'new' or supposedly equivalent representations.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, McCourt likens his classroom role to that of Wayne's 'lawman' portrayal, albeit acknowledging subtly, whether he knows it, that he is himself both physically and spiritually indispensable to his pupils, since without McCourt's authority they would exist in an atmosphere of chaos. He says: 'I was at center stage: Master Teacher, interrogator, Puppeteer, Conductor.'<sup>43</sup> Certainly, by his own estimation in *Teacher Man*, McCourt brings integrity and coherence into the dystopic lives of some of his pupils.

According to Limerick Local Studies Archivist, Michael Maguire, Limerick's many cinemas would have played all of the John Wayne movies that were released in Ireland, particularly as 'B' movies at Saturday matinees, with only the main feature being advertised.<sup>44</sup> McCourt is sure to be familiar with Ethan Edwards's (Wayne's character)

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<sup>41</sup>*Rio Bravo*, produced and directed by Howard Hawks, Warner Brothers Pictures (1959). The film was shown in New York in 1959, by which time McCourt would have been teaching since the summer of 1957, as he tells us in *'Tis*, p. 287.

See André Bazin, 'The Western: Or the American Film Par Excellence', in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 2, trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 149-158 (p. 147). Bazin argues that the Western dramatises an epic battle between the 'forces of evil' and the 'knights of the true cause.' Bazin sees the genre as being able to address basic human realities through the mythologisation of a particular phase of American history.

<sup>42</sup>Richard Schechner, Introduction, 'Performance and the Social Sciences', in *The Drama Review*, Vol. 17 (1973), 5-36 (p. 3).

<sup>43</sup> *Teacher Man*, p. 225.

<sup>44</sup>Telephone conversation with Michael Maguire, Local Studies Archivist, Limerick City Library, 19 May 2009. Maguire said: 'Limerick had many cinemas during the period that McCourt lived here, and would have played all of John Wayne's movies that were released to Ireland [...] Some of his earlier films would have

steadfast ten-year revenge quest to return his kidnapped niece to the family in *The Searchers*. Here Wayne represents a strong male character at odds with McCourt's representation of his father's code of masculine behaviour and lack of paternal nurturing in *Angela's Ashes*. The young McCourt must search for a more effective definition of manhood by compiling noble characteristics of Hollywood's construction of masculinity, which allows him to weave his memoir with the sombre foreshadowing of his father's failure. As we saw in Chapter 2, McCourt's father's vain cloak of manhood is to wear a 'collar and tie and never let people see you carry things.' Soon after this lesson in respectable manhood, McCourt's grandmother poses a rhetorical question:

What are ye having for yeer [Christmas] dinner? Pig's head! Jesus, Mary an' Joseph, that's goin' beyond the beyonds. Couldn't your father get out and find a ham or a goose at least? What kind of man is he at all, at all (p.107)?

Not only does her opinion expose him to language that echoes Seán O'Casey's comic dialogue, as we shall see in Chapter 4, but also when it is combined with cinematic images, McCourt's self-awareness is enhanced. In particular, he recognises that Ireland is 'not America [...] if I were in America I could say, I love you Dad, the way they do in the films, but you can't say that in Limerick for fear that you might be laughed at' (pp.238-9). McCourt recalls that terms of endearment in Limerick are viewed as being confined to the Hollywood film, illustrated through his mother's opinion of the affection shown by her neighbours, Bridey and John Hannon: 'They're like two lovers out of an American film the way they go on' (p.298). McCourt is showing the beginnings of resentment against a society that frowns upon the freedom to express emotion and the lure of America is strengthened by his need for the autonomy it offers in this broader sense. However, Hollywood's depiction of America is not the reality that Angela McCourt experiences nor does she enjoy Hollywood's depiction of marital harmony in reality.

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continued to be replayed as 'B movies' and on Saturday matinee showings for years, as was common practice in many Limerick cinemas of the time.' This accounts for the reason that many of Wayne's earlier films are not listed in the Limerick newspapers. Only the 'main feature' is advertised.

Steve Neale's belief that Wayne's screen persona addresses the issue of masculinity as 'spectacle', challenges Laura Mulvey's contention that it is the female who is positioned on screen as an object of desire and as such, connotes 'to-be-looked-at-ness.'<sup>45</sup> Neale's argument will be explored in greater depth in my ensuing discussion of Astaire. For now though, Neale posits his contention in the context of those films that represent an extravagant form of masculinity, such as elaborately staged, somewhat phallic rituals like Western gunfights and gangster shootouts, or the performative display of men in musicals; films in which the male hero is 'powerful and omnipotent to an extraordinary degree.'<sup>46</sup> Neale laments that Mulvey denies the male star the function of an erotic object and argues that the elements that she considers should be measured in relation to images of men, particularly as the spectatorial look is so insistently male. He believes that 'the erotic elements involved in the relations between the spectator and the male image have constantly to be repressed and disavowed.'<sup>47</sup> When understood through the prism of Neale's argument, McCourt's resultant anxieties about his own shortcomings suggest that masculinity is an effect of culture and that Hollywood's creation of a commodified spectacle can be destructive.

McCourt's self-image does not compare to the theme of aesthetic masculinity. His obsession with his physiognomy highlights some of the attributes with which Hollywood is most concerned, namely his eyes and teeth, both of which feature heavily in the cinematic 'close-up'. Catching sight of his fourteen-year-old self in his grandmother's mirror, he closes in on eyes that are red and 'oozing yellow' with matching red and yellow pimples and front teeth so black with rot that he will 'never be able to smile in

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<sup>45</sup>Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, ed. by Laura Mulvey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 14-26 (p. 19).

<sup>46</sup> Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema', in *Screening The Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), 9-20 (p. 19).

<sup>47</sup> Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle', p. 12.

Also see, Yvonne Tasker, 'Dumb Movies for Dumb People: Masculinity, The Body, and the Voice in Contemporary Action Cinema', in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), 230-244 (pp. 233, 242). Tasker appropriates Jacques Lacan's theory of male parade, arguing that masculinity can be seen as performative within Hollywood's representational system. She highlights Hollywood's concentration on the primacy of the body and voice, and the different masculine identities they propose, viewing the male body as a vehicle of display that adopts heroism as a 'costume', or mere masquerade.

my life' (p.356). Although McCourt's psychological vulnerability, emotional reticence and lack of social power are highlighted in such passages, he is playing against Hollywood's sanitised notions of poverty to which spectators have been exposed from Charlie Chaplin's silent melodrama *The Kid* in 1921, until *Slumdog Millionaire* in 2008.<sup>48</sup> Even so, as we saw in Chapter 1, Alison Landsberg's theory of 'prosthetic' memory, which she contends allows a 'sensuous' engagement with the past, helps to elucidate McCourt's concern with his body. Landsberg believes that like an artificial limb, certain memories are actually worn on the body, often 'mark[ing] a trauma.'<sup>49</sup> This is most notable in the persona that McCourt constructs for himself in *'Tis* when he starts his first job of houseman sweeping the lobby of the Biltmore Hotel. McCourt longs to be associated with the 'golden girls' who stare at his sore eyes as they wait in the Palm Court to meet crew-cut college boys under the famous Biltmore clock. McCourt's emotionally vulnerable masculinity is exacerbated by a lack of physical credentials that would support his aspirational status as an object of desire, and he longs for a visible appearance that correlates to the 1940s and 1950s view of the Hollywood male star. McCourt contrasts himself with the poise of the 'all American' boys whose white teeth and 'football shoulders' not only attract an ardent female audience but also are certain to make them laugh and pass remarks about McCourt's appearance.<sup>50</sup>

### **The girl who 'could have stepped down from a movie screen'<sup>51</sup>**

McCourt's description in *'Tis* of his first encounter with Alberta Small personifies Hollywood's concentration on the female body through the cinematic 'gaze'.<sup>52</sup> McCourt re-presents her late entrance into the classroom as a film scene that illustrates the phallogocentric bias of cinema, and by awarding Alberta the spotlight, McCourt implicates her in Mulvey's notion of fetishist scopophilia. Moreover, since she chooses to be

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<sup>48</sup> *The Kid*, produced and directed by Charles Chaplin, Associated First National Pictures (1921). *Slumdog Millionaire*, directed by Danny Boyle, produced by Christian Colson, Film 4 Production Company *et al* (Film 4 *et al* (2008).

<sup>49</sup> Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an age of Mass Culture', p. 149.

<sup>50</sup> *'Tis*, pp. 24-25, 32.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>52</sup> Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', pp. 11, 13.



addressed as 'Mike', Alberta adopts a 'star' persona through the use of a pseudonym, just as the Hollywood studios often changed the names of their leading lights. McCourt places Alberta in the position of the female star by heightening the physical beauty of the object and transforming the image into something satisfying in itself. He recalls his first sight of her in the manner that depicts a film star's screen entrance:

When she saunters into the psychology class the professor himself lets his jaw drop and he grips a piece of chalk so hard it cracks and breaks [...] We're feasting on her blonde hair, blue eyes, luscious lips, a bosom that is an occasion of sin, a figure that makes you throb in the middle of your body [...] When the class ends I want to make sure I let her pass up the aisle so that I can watch her coming and see her going with that figure you see only in films.<sup>53</sup>

The perfection that McCourt sees in Alberta's face and figure draws out Hollywood's overt concern with exhibitionism, while illustrating how the cinema creates femininity in terms of socially constructed categories. McCourt becomes obsessed with the unattainability of the girl who 'could have stepped down from a movie screen [...] her glass is still on the table and it's marked with pink lipstick. I put it to my lips for the taste of her and dream that some day I'll kiss the lips themselves.'<sup>54</sup> For McCourt, Alberta's 'aura' and lipstick mark are paler copies of 'the original.'<sup>55</sup> However, the consumption that he implies through 'feasting' on her body is shrouded in Catholic guilt, a fact reiterated by McCourt in a 2002 interview: 'As far as the priests were concerned, a woman was an occasion of sin. You just look at one, you start getting ideas.'<sup>56</sup>

McCourt's fixation with Alberta extends to sitting at the library window just to watch her movements: 'There's nothing in my head but Mike Small. Blonde, blue-eyed, delicious [...] the all-American girl.'<sup>57</sup> Alberta's boyfriend, a student 'the size of a mountain wearing a jacket that says New York University Football', intimidates

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<sup>53</sup> *Tis*, p. 173.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>55</sup> See Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', pp. 251-220.

<sup>56</sup> Barry Egan, 'The Roman Spring of Frank McCourt', in *Independent.ie*, 26 May 2002

<<http://www.independent.ie/unsorted/features/the-roman-spring-of-frank-mccourt-501264.html>> [accessed 10 August 2009].

<sup>57</sup> *Tis*, pp. 204, 213.

McCourt, who recalls wanting to 'find the back of a comic book where Charles Atlas promises to help me build muscles that will let me kick sand in Bob's face'. This itself is a Chaplinesque conceit in *The Champion* in which Charlie defeats the man who resembles Charles Atlas.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, McCourt describes himself as 'a man from a slum who never went to high school and gawks at the world with two eyes like pissholes in the snow.'<sup>59</sup> Even when he succeeds in winning Alberta, McCourt is tormented by insecurities about assimilation into her 'uptown New York world' and ponders upon why she does not prefer to marry someone with 'clear blue eyes and spotless white teeth', who would take her to cocktail parties and 'frolic in the night in the grip of the gin.'<sup>60</sup> Here McCourt's deliberate use of the definite article contrasts his 'Irishness' with Alberta's all-American values.

Although McCourt's fascination with Alberta's bloneness is symptomatic of his particular culture and generation, he also specifies that it is a fundamental element of desirable femininity. Richard Dyer refers to Marilyn Monroe's bloneness as a symbol of the 'ultimate embodiment of the desirable woman: [...] the symbolism of sexuality itself.'<sup>61</sup> Dyer argues elsewhere that the radiance of studio glamour lighting makes Monroe disappear as 'flesh and blood.'<sup>62</sup> This effect is embodied in the opening scenes of *The Seven Year Itch* in which Monroe's hourglass silhouette is visible through frosted glass.<sup>63</sup> Dyer also highlights the paradox that despite being among the most celebrated cinematic blondes, Monroe was 'peroxided to within an inch of [her] li[fe]', thereby foregrounding the act of fakery fashioned by Hollywood's producers and studio

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<sup>58</sup> 'Tis, p. 174.

*The Champion*, directed by Charles Chaplin, produced by Jess Robbins, The Essanay Film Manufacturing Company (1915).

<sup>59</sup> 'Tis, p. 210.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>61</sup> Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), pp. 42, 44.

Elsewhere, Dyer has described Monroe's image as being situated in the flux of ideas about morality and sexuality that characterises 1950s America. See Dyer, *Stars*, p. 31.

<sup>62</sup> Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London: Routledge, 2000[1993]), p. 161.

<sup>63</sup> *The Seven Year Itch*, directed by Billy Wilder, produced by Charles K. Feldman and Billy Wilder, Twentieth Century Fox (1955). McCourt dates his obsession with Alberta to 1955, when *The Seven Year Itch* was released.

Also see, Joyce Carol Oates, *Blonde* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000). Oates reduces Monroe to a synecdochal presence.

bosses.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Marina Warner considers the ways in which blondeness and beauty are synonymous in Western myth and fairy-tales such as the inevitably golden-haired Cinderella in contrast to her dark-haired sisters and stepmother.<sup>65</sup> Monroe's place in the history of sensuality and her incomparable star image is influential enough for McCourt to seek a girl who embodies the same myth and iconicity. However, Alberta's persona is a complex mix of the 'all-American girl next door', the Monroe-style screen goddess and the figure that Carter describes as the 'cultural myth of the *femme fatale*.<sup>66</sup> Of course, Alberta is at odds with the ideal of Irish female physicality that can be found in actress Maureen O'Hara, who, although somewhat buxom and attractive, Bryan McDonald believes epitomises de Valera's vision of the 'comely maiden'.<sup>67</sup> Naturally, McCourt's Catholic upbringing assures the centrality of the Virgin Mary in his psyche: 'We were all doomed unless we mended our ways and devoted ourselves to the Virgin Mary entirely.'<sup>68</sup> The inebriate priest who McCourt claims attempted to sexually abuse him soon after his arrival in New York, advises McCourt to 'meditate on the purity of the Virgin Mary', if he is tempted to sin.<sup>69</sup> Thus, representations of Irish female sexuality are negative because of the necessary emphasis upon traditional ideas about chastity. When McCourt finally marries his blonde goddess, Alberta, she represents the illusory Protestant promise of America.

It is in *'Tis* that McCourt first discloses how his indifference towards suburban domesticity and professional achievement becomes a narrative of emotional despondency.<sup>70</sup> Betty Friedan condemned the limited and unsatisfying gender roles of educated American women in the post-World War II era, contending that their identity and sense of self was forfeited to a life centred on domesticity. To this generation, biological sex certified gender, so females should possess what Friedan terms the

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<sup>64</sup> Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999 [1997]), p. 78.

<sup>65</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), pp. 363-366.

<sup>66</sup> Carter, 'Femmes Fatales', in *Shaking A Leg: Journalism and Writings*, 350-354 (p. 350).

<sup>67</sup> Bryan McDonald, 'Whatever Happened to the Irish Actress?', in *Dubliner*, Issue 9 (November 2001), 15-22 (p. 17).

<sup>68</sup> *'Tis*, p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>70</sup> McCourt's literary success indicates where his ambition did actually lay.

'feminine mystique', naturally.<sup>71</sup> Alberta embodies Friedan's notion of essentialised femininity, which has been challenged by Judith Butler as being formed by masquerade and parody through a 'stylised repetition of acts' or the manipulation of signs through bodily gestures, which produce the *effect* of gender and the 'illusion of an abiding gendered self.'<sup>72</sup> Butler argues that what appears to be an identity that originates as a natural consequence of anatomical sex, is merely an effect of performance. These performances or masquerades make gendered acts visible on screen as the female 'star' enacts the theatricality of femininity. The gendered self is, therefore, constructed through a series of corporeal effects such as voice, gesture and demeanour, albeit within particular historical and cultural contexts.

This notwithstanding, there is no happy Hollywood ending for McCourt and Alberta. Instead of consummating their wedding night in the summer of 1961, they celebrate with an argument that prompts Jim Collins to ask: 'This is your goddam wedding night, McCourt. Where is your bride? [...] We climbed the stairs to my apartment, found a six-pack [...] and watched television Indians drop from the bullets of John Wayne.'<sup>73</sup> Ultimately, Alberta decides that McCourt is 'going nowhere in life' and the escalating acrimony not only reveals their contrasting social positions, but also highlights a fundamental incompatibility: 'The marriage had become a sustained squabble [...] Slum-reared Irish Catholics have nothing in common with nice girls from New England.'<sup>74</sup> In *Teacher Man* McCourt describes the disintegration of the marriage in cinematic terms. He resists agreeing with Alberta about his lack of ambition by giving her 'a sermon on life in America', and how he thought he was living in the wrong century instead of the days of the wagon master in Western movies when:

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<sup>71</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963).

<sup>72</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 140.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>74</sup> *Tis*, pp. 368, 390.

John Wayne, Randolph Scott, Joel McCrae – cracked his whip and called, Move out, and the studio orchestra went into raptures, fifty violins swelling with prairie patriotism, pure wagon-train music, violins and banjos welcoming the harmonica wail [...].<sup>75</sup>

McCourt is no doubt basing his 'sermon' on the elegiac tale of the passing of the Old West in *Ride the High Country* featuring Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea, yet pronouncing that he wants to live autonomously and imaginatively in the American West.<sup>76</sup> David Daly and Joel Persky discuss the powerful emotional appeal of the 'seeming freedom' associated with a nomadic life whereby cowboys are rarely depicted with family ties, and 'ride off on adventures at a moment's notice [...] In the myth he is free.'<sup>77</sup> Mulvey, meanwhile, uses *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance*, to illustrate the play of two diverging images of masculinity, noting the split between Tom Doniphon (Wayne's character), the social outsider, and Ranse Stoddart (James Stewart), who incarnates the civilizing functions of marriage, social integration, and social responsibility. Mulvey points to two narrative functions: 'marriage', which brings social order, and 'not marriage', which indicates the hero's refusal to enter society:

An important aspect of narrative closure is 'marriage', a function characterised by the 'princess' or equivalent [...] This function is very commonly reproduced in the Western [but] while the social integration represented by marriage is an essential aspect of the folk-tale, in the Western it can be accepted [...] or not.<sup>78</sup>

Hence, Wayne's character can 'tame' the West but is unable to find a place after civilisation has been established. McCourt's perceived idea of civilisation is matrimony and its accoutrements which he chooses to abandon rather than 'work on' the marriage, 'wear a tie [...] charm wives, play squash, pretend an interest in antiques.'<sup>79</sup> McCourt is seduced by this Hollywood-created illusion and prefers to be defined by the

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<sup>75</sup> *Teacher Man*, p. 121.

<sup>76</sup> *Ride the High Country*, directed Sam Peckinpah, produced by Richard E. Lyons, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (1962). McCourt's marriage to Alberta's was less than six months old when the film was released.

<sup>77</sup> Daly and Persky, *Journal of the West*, p. 29.

<sup>78</sup> Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, ed. by Laura Mulvey (Houndsmill: Palgrave, 1989) 29-38 (p. 33).

*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, directed by John Ford, produced by John Ford and Willis Goldbeck, Paramount Pictures (1962).

<sup>79</sup> *Tis*, p. 369.

mythic structures of the Western genre and its heroes; the frontier, individualism, towering dominance, thereby enacting what Cleary (as influenced by Jameson) labels 'venturing back into an inert and remaindered past [that he] knows solely through stocks of celluloid images.'<sup>80</sup>

My analysis of McCourt's youthful fascination with John Wayne has uncovered McCourt's struggle to assimilate the indignities of the new country with the poverty of the old, demonstrating how cinematic references to the Western genre help him to navigate the past and reconcile it with the present. With regard to the present in which *Angela's Ashes* appeared, Cleary's analysis of Jim Sheridan's *Into the West* can be restructured and applied to McCourt. Cleary argues that the 'celluloid west' that this chapter argues structures McCourt's fantasy world, functions as a visual metaphor for 'a pre-Celtic-Tiger Ireland's problematic position as a chronically dependent and dysfunctional economy being increasingly subsumed into a soulless late capitalist "West" on which it abjectly relies for its very survival.'<sup>81</sup> Whether he knows it, McCourt is demonstrating Cleary's argument that although the literature of the 'Celtic Tiger' era (including *Angela's Ashes*), was apparently set in the past, it expressed concerns and anxieties that were actually those of the present.<sup>82</sup>

### **James Cagney: The original Irish 'Mick'**

When the young Frankie McCourt paid 'tuppence' regularly to watch Cagney in the dramatised urban space of New York or Chicago from 'the gods' at the Lyric Cinema, he could scarcely have imagined that he would teach at Stuyvesant High School, 'the alma mater [...] of James Cagney himself', as he says in *Teacher Man*.<sup>83</sup> According to Andrew Bergman, as audiences flocked to gangster films in the early 1930s, they stopped

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<sup>80</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 192.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>83</sup> *Angela's Ashes*, p. 120. McCourt recalls: 'If your mother is in a good mood she might even give you tuppence to go to the Lyric cinema the next day to see a film with James Cagney.' *Tis*, p. 102; *Teacher Man*, p. 183. N.B. Here I am reiterating that the diminutive 'Frankie' distinguishes McCourt the boy in the narrative from Frank, the writer and narrator.

going to Westerns.<sup>84</sup> This fact is acknowledged by Robert Sklar who argues that for its 1931 audience, and for coming decades, *Public Enemy* personified 'the urban disorder spawned in American society by Prohibition and briefly romanticized the chaotic and rebellious early years of The Depression.'<sup>85</sup> Therefore, it seems that as economic conditions worsened the greater the need to witness a rags to riches story, despite the violence and treachery that the gangster genre depicts. In fact, Joseph Curran argues that Cagney made the 'urban antihero' as important a symbol in American life and popular culture as the cowboy, and one much more relevant to the experience of modern America.<sup>86</sup>

A key reason for Cagney's popularity was that although he was primarily a New York star, as an Irish-American he was also an icon for immigrants, appealing directly to McCourt because of their shared position in the urban immigrant history of America's twentieth-century. Moreover, McCourt's empathy with 'American' icons contrasts with his denigration of and distance from Irish mythology: he associates Cuchulain with his father, whose eventual permanent absence causes McCourt to seek an idealised masculine figure: 'When you have your father to yourself by the fire in the morning you don't need Cuchulain' (pp.13,238). McCourt's insistence on blending Hollywood cinema with Irish myth is reiterated in *Life* magazine: 'Then there were the gangster movies with our Cuchulain, James Cagney, up to all kinds of devilment.'<sup>87</sup> McCourt is anointing Cagney as the Cuchulain of Hollywood by casting him as an urban outlaw whose exploits are retold as mythical and legendary tales, particularly as Warner Brothers portray Cagney as an outsider/insider figure.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and its Films* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), pp. 6-7. According to Bergman, during the most devastating years of the Depression, Americans were especially attracted to outlaws because the manner in which they operated reinforced 'cherished myths' about individual success.

<sup>85</sup>Robert Sklar, *City Boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 9,11. *Public Enemy*, produced and directed by William A. Wellman, Warner Brothers Pictures (1931).

<sup>86</sup>Joseph M. Curran, *Hibernian Green On The Silver Screen: The Irish and American Movies* (London: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 41.

<sup>87</sup>McCourt, 'What Immigration Means To Me', p. 7.

<sup>88</sup> See Otis Ferguson, 'Life Goes To The Pictures', in *The Film Criticism of Otis Ferguson* ed. by Robert Wilson (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1971), p. 8, original source *Films*, (Spring, 1940). Ferguson

George O'Brien deems that McCourt constructs a version of himself as a 'Cagneyesque angel-with-a-dirty face' that imbues *Angela's Ashes* with an air of 'naturalness, spontaneity, innocence and resilience, despite the artifice of its cinematic prototype.'<sup>89</sup> This stands as a further response to Foster's challenge about McCourt's invention of his material. Rather than straightforwardly fictionalising events, McCourt uses Hollywood filmic references to encode various national and class issues and to assist his quest for literary effect. For example, McCourt claims to have been utilising Cagney's most renowned screen image of the Irish-American gangster of Hollywood's golden age and the associated codified gestures and poses, when agonising about 'what to say' to his classes: 'Should I swagger into the classroom like James Cagney or march in like an Irish schoolmaster with a stick, a strap and a roar?'; a statement that resounds with McCourt's aforementioned quandary about whether to emulate Wayne's affirmative and progressive masculinity.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, McCourt's desire to fashion himself with the attributes of these screen heroes personifies Greenblatt's contention that self-fashioning produces a 'sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world.'<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, both models implicate McCourt in wanting to exercise power and control rather than be the victim of it. It also indicates that McCourt is influenced by Cagney's screen image as a tough urban gangster, even though McCourt's description of the Irish schoolmaster is that of an equally intimidating figure. Although Cagney's raspy voice and staccato vocal inflections helped to create the paradoxes within his screen characters, McCourt clearly contemplates copying a pedagogical profile that combines Cagney's screen menace with the affable side of his persona. The significance of this is best explained through Otis Ferguson's belief that cinema transforms Cagney from 'this half-pint of East Side Irish' into 'what a typical American'

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contends that Cagney 'can coax or shove a director until a scene from a dreamy script becomes a scene from life as Cagney remembered it.'

<sup>89</sup>George O'Brien, 'The Last Word: Reflections on *Angela's Ashes*', in *New Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora*, ed. by Charles Fanning (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 2396-249 (p. 240).

<sup>90</sup>'Tis, p. 231.

<sup>91</sup>Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 2.



might be.<sup>92</sup> Yet, McCourt has to undergo a complex negotiation between the real-life Cagney and his star image.

The Celtic underworld is another way of examining and understanding the Irish-American experience. The glamorised gangster figure has to be understood in relation to the wider society of the era, wherein the hoodlum is depicted as either a villain or an outlaw hero admired for defying authority and challenging capitalism. Since underworld activities mirror the injustices of American economic life, the gangster functions as a noir double of 'respectable' society, parodying the American drive for success.<sup>93</sup> This helps to explain the appeal of notable cinematic gangsters like George Raft as Tony in *Scarface*, Edward G. Robinson as Caesar Enrico Bandello, alias 'Rico', in *Little Caesar* and Cagney as Tom Powers in *Public Enemy*; strong figures who succeed through their own efforts in the face of opposition.<sup>94</sup> However, the real 'Irish Mob' originated in the Irish American street gangs as immortalised in 1926 by Herbert Asbury in *The Gangs of New York*, and later in Martin Scorsese's 2002 film of the same name.<sup>95</sup> While he does not provide evidence, T. J. English believes that 'The Mob' was a reinvention of the pre-famine Celtic clan system, rehabilitated in New York as a consequence of 'starvation, disease, desperation and bigotry.'<sup>96</sup> English makes a rather romanticised contention that the Irish saw Prohibition as a WASP attack on the Irish way of life and as a way of prospering.<sup>97</sup> The Irish fight for a better existence meant either entering the realms of law enforcement and politics or capitalising on opportunities from beyond

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<sup>92</sup>Ferguson, 'Cagney: Great Guy', in *The Film Criticism of Otis Ferguson*, p. 198. From the original film review, October 1937.

<sup>93</sup>See Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1977), cited in Nick Browne, *Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather Trilogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 14.

<sup>94</sup>*Scarface*, directed by Howard Hawks, produced by Howard Hughes, United Artists Corporation (1932). *Little Caesar*, First National Pictures Corporation (1931). Robinson created the prototypical American movie gangster in the Warner Brothers crime cycle of the 1930s.

<sup>95</sup>Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld*, reprinted in original format (New York: Dorset Press, 1989[1926]), pp. 125-126. According to Asbury, during the early years of Prohibition, 'Big' Bill Dwyer emerged as the leading Irish American bootlegger until his arrest in 1925. *Gangs of New York*, directed by Martin Scorsese, produced by Alberto Grimaldi, Miramax Film Corporation (2002).

<sup>96</sup>T. J. English, *Paddy Whacked: The Untold Story of the Irish American Gangster* (London: Harper Collins, 2005), pp. 9, 125.

<sup>97</sup>English, *Paddy Whacked*, p.125.

the law. Through foregrounding the 'gangster' genre, McCourt reveals the shortcomings in the American way of life by exposing the gap between the ideology surrounding the United States as the land of equal opportunity, and the actuality. In some cases, success for the emigrant or dispossessed could only be pursued illegally or through violence, particularly as gang members are emblematic of the rebellion against discriminatory economic structures.

The rise of the gangster genre was encouraged by escalating crime and urban violence in the Prohibition era. Many of the sensational plots were taken from newspaper headlines about actual events that concerned real-life personalities, whereby organised crime 'rackets' of bootlegging, gambling and prostitution afforded gangsters a folk hero status. Indeed, the real-life-mobster Al Capone, is infamous for the near elimination of his Irish rivals, the George 'Bugs' Moran gang, in Chicago on St Valentine's Day 1929.<sup>98</sup> As Nick Roddick observes, 'Gangster Movies' were relatively cheap to make because they used contemporary dress, minimal sets like 'seedy restaurants, backroom offices and hotel rooms', and exteriors that rarely called for anything other than the 'standing sets of the backlot.'<sup>99</sup> In *The Roaring Twenties*, Cagney plays a character that leads a life of crime as a Bootlegger. In June 2009 McCourt told me in an email: 'Last night I watched - for the zillionth time - James Cagney in *The Roaring Twenties*.'<sup>100</sup> In English's opinion, Cagney 'picked up the mannerisms and attitudes' that were deeply engrained in the lower-middle-class Irish of his neighbourhood, turning them into the raw material for the 'hard-boiled, smart alecky [and] "street-wise" characters.' English argues further: 'What he didn't pilfer from the characters of his youth, Cagney got from his mobster associations. Ironically, the man who made the introductions was a friend

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<sup>98</sup>*The New York Times*, February 15 1929. Bold banner headline and 'next day' news report of the St Valentine's Day Massacre in Chicago: '7 Chicago Gangsters Slain by Firing Squad of Rivals, some in Police Uniforms', p. 1, C7, p. 2, C1-2.

<sup>99</sup>Nick Roddick, *A New Deal In Entertainment: Warner Brothers in the 1930s* (London: British Film Institute, 1983), p. 99.

<sup>100</sup>*The Roaring Twenties*, directed by Raoul Walsh, produced by Hal B. Wallis, Warner Brothers Pictures (1939). Screening of *The Roaring Twenties* advertised in the *Limerick Leader*, 12 March 1941, p. 1, c. 2. Personal email from Frank McCourt, 18 June 2009.

and fellow actor, George Raft.<sup>101</sup> Thus, by recalling this particular cinematic version of Cagney, McCourt is 'pilfering' from his own youth, while suggesting that even real-life gangsters acquire their authority from the ability to act and project a certain persona.<sup>102</sup>

Sklar's alternative definition of Cagney is that of a 'quintessential' twentieth-century 'American city boy', with no 'exact parallel' from within literary or theatrical convention. Yet, like 'the cowboy', he is encountered 'solely in the popular arts', as a social construct of film genre and convention.<sup>103</sup> Sklar argues that Cagney's 'quick gait, his rapid-fire slangy talk, his sharp movements', assured that he survived the forces of change in American culture and society.<sup>104</sup> This being so, McCourt is able to watch the signifiers associated with Cagney's physical presence from the 'silver screen', and witness him perform the gangster's rise to power and wealth through law-defying escapades enhanced by an easily identifiable *mise-en-scène*. Screams, siren wails, staccato machine gun fire, screeching brakes and squealing car tyres are the excessive iconographic signs that McCourt consumes.

Sartorial detail is carried to the extreme in the gangster film, and is a staple part of Cagney's iconography, investing him with the attributes of the star. The genre demands that men's suits be modified to create the image of a large torso. Shoulders have the appearance of being squared through padding and broad lapels frame a v-shaped chest, while the narrow waists of generously cut trousers accentuate this

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<sup>101</sup> English, *Paddy Whacked*, pp. 194 -196.

<sup>102</sup> Ironically, Raft's film career was affected by his audience's distaste for his personal gambling habits and rumours about his apparent gangster lifestyle through syndicate connections with Owney 'The Killer' Madden and others. Erstwhile conversations with my late Aunt, Mary Catherine Burke, who lived in Chicago at the time of Al Capone's prominence and who was made impoverished by the Wall Street Crash.

<sup>103</sup> Sklar, *City Boys*, p. 9.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13, 277

Also see, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: (The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City)*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1963), pp. 246-247. Glazer and Moynihan observe: 'When it came to portraying the tough American, up from the streets, the image was repeatedly that of an Irishman. James Cagney (a New Yorker) was the quintessential figure: fists cocked, chin out, back straight, bouncing along on his heels.'

Also see, Colin McArthur, *Underworld USA* (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1972), p. 24.

Also see, Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 8. Neale argues that the iconography associated with Cagney is in itself a pleasure.

additional breadth to the shoulders. McCourt says in *Angela's Ashes* that if he had the money he would light a candle to St Francis to persuade God to perform a miracle, or if he had a stamp he would write to ask Joe Louis how he got his 'powerful shoulders' even though he was poor (p.356). Encoded here is a clear link between gangster iconography and religion. In the underworld, violence always wins because religion is usurped by another type of idolotary. However, as Walter Noble Burns has noted, the careers of such real-life Irish gangsters as Dion O'Bannion, 'the choir boy of Holy Name Cathedral', show that a life of crime did not automatically exclude one from participating in the life of the church.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, in *Angels with Dirty Faces*, Pat O'Brien plays Catholic priest, Father Jerry Connolly, serving as a friend and moral guide to Cagney's character, Rocky Sullivan.<sup>106</sup> Thus, Cagney is seen not only as an urban gangster but also as Irish and Catholic. Of course, the authenticity of Cagney's gangster persona to the real-life 'hoodlum' figure is just as complex as Hollywood's fidelity to historically remembered incidents and we see a somewhat fallacious rendering of events that have replaced the 'real' experience, which draws parallels with McCourt's own construction of story.<sup>107</sup>

Cagney's on-screen persona reflects cultural codes simultaneously (the sanctioned rebel or good-but-bad boy who is both part of and apart from society) that position him as an immigrant ideal, as well as his fighting persona embodying the Irish-American stereotype.<sup>108</sup> However, this portrait is in direct contrast to James Joyce's idea that the Irish were a 'gentle' race. Joyce uses physical pathologies to evaluate the spiritual condition of Dubliners, considering their city to be the centre of paralysis. Joyce's view that Dublin suffered from an hemiplegia of the will, delineates sharply from the image

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<sup>105</sup>Walter Noble Burns, *The One-Way Ride: The Red Trail of Chicago Gangland from Prohibition to Jake Lingle* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1931), p. 80.

<sup>106</sup>*Angels with Dirty Faces*, directed by Michael Curtiz, produced by Sam Bischoff, Warner Brothers Pictures (1938).

<sup>107</sup>For more on this issue see, Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire', in *Representations* 26, trans. by Marc Roudebush (Spring 1989), pp. 7-25. Nora defines this type of memory as being 'deformed and transformed.'

<sup>108</sup>'The Sanctioned Rebel' is a term used by Judith Fetterley. See 'The Sanctioned Rebel', in *Studies in the Novel*, 3 (Fall 1971), 293-304.

of 'the fighting Irish'.<sup>109</sup> Even so, Peter Quinn contends that the Irish gradually turned their association with the city streets from a slur into a strength, assisted by Cagney's personification of 'Paddy's transmogrification from mud-splattered, simpleminded, shillelagh-wielding spalpeen into sceptical, fast-talking urbanite who could never be mistaken for a greenhorn or rube.<sup>110</sup> Ironically, the overt violence that is an integral part of the gangster genre does play into the pre-existing image of the anti-Irish stereotype. As Maureen Dezell emphasises, re-claiming this identity through cinema can also be a positive method: 'The Irish turned stereotypes that were used to stigmatise them into cultural currency.'<sup>111</sup> Cagney's success is a clear indication of this.

The presence of a large Irish ethnic community in the United States was a likely significant factor for Hollywood to showcase 'Irish' subject matter. Ruth Barton argues that Hollywood understood this importance and that the 'key Irishman, James Cagney', in the form of the urban gangster, embodied the 'contrasting allegiances of that ethnic audience.'<sup>112</sup> This is exemplified through Warner Brother's successful commercial decision to depict Cagney's character, Tom Powers with an Irish background in *Public Enemy* at a time when Italians dominated organised crime 'rackets'.<sup>113</sup> Since Cagney's working-class identity is constructed as part of his star biography and developed through commentary and his screen persona, McCourt is able to identify with both Cagney's class and ethnic self-fashioning. Indeed, Cagney introduces the young McCourt to the New York slang that he is struck by in 1949: 'Gawden. Joisey. My first day in New York and already people are talking like gangsters from the films I saw in Limerick.'<sup>114</sup> This easily recognised New York vernacular suggests that the compelling force of Cagney's characters from the ethnic neighbourhoods of Chicago and New York

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<sup>109</sup> James Joyce quoted in Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper* (New York: The Viking Press, 1948), p. 45.

<sup>110</sup> Quinn, 'Looking for Jimmy', in *Making The Irish American*, ed. by J. J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 668-679 (p. 671).

Also see *Tis*, p. 16. McCourt is referred to as a 'greenhorn' upon his arrival in New York.

<sup>111</sup> Dezell, *Irish America: Coming Into Clover*, pp. 32.

<sup>112</sup> Ruth Barton, Introduction, *Screening Irish-America: Representing Irish-America in Film and Television*, ed. by Ruth Barton (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), pp. 4 -5.

<sup>113</sup> See especially, Kirstein, 'James Cagney and the American Hero', p. 466. Cagney was then identified as being at once distinctly Irish yet also representative of a broader urban America.

<sup>114</sup> *Tis*, p. 16.

are more attractive than alienating to McCourt since Cagney embodies an ideological position for McCourt as an Irish-American emigrant. Cagney reflects and reinforces McCourt's desire to return to New York, providing both consolation and inspiration by alleviating McCourt's anxieties and insecurity, and confirming that it is possible to assimilate into 'America' successfully.<sup>115</sup>

The real-life Cagney, who Curran describes as possessing an 'unmistakable touch of the gutter' combined with 'equally unmistakable Irishness, has a symbolic value for the young Frankie through an association with the Cinderella myth.<sup>116</sup> This rags-to-riches fairytale became a reality for McCourt himself through the success of *Angela's Ashes*. The collective emblematic idea of the Cinderella myth was used to keep the majority of Irish emigrants in their 'proper' station in life. Many were unable to penetrate social hierarchies and the myth demarcates those who have and those who have not. Although the public face of the 'American Dream' united Irish-Americans in the belief that liberty, hard work and education were the sure way to success, the private reality was that it also divided them, as Kerby Miller notes:

Nearly all studies of the Irish [...] in North America exhibit a deadening and depressing sameness. Irish emigrants were disproportionately concentrated in the lowest-paid, least-skilled, and most dangerous and insecure employment, with the highest rates of transience, residential density and segregation, inadequate housing and sanitation [...] Upward occupational mobility was unusually slight.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> See Lincoln Kirstein, 'James Cagney and the American Hero', in *Hound & Horn* 5 (April-June, 1932), 465-467 (pp. 465-467). Kirstein describes Cagney as 'Mick-Irish', seeing him as the 'first definitely metropolitan figure to become national' having metamorphosed into a 'short, red-headed, Irishman, quick to wrath, humorous, articulate in anger', and representing 'the American hero, whom ordinary men and boys recognize as themselves.'

Also see, Quinn, 'Looking for Jimmy', p. 671. Quinn argues that Cagney 'expressed the style of the urban Irish in its definitive form, defining him as an 'actor-hooper with looks of a handsome prize-fighter lucky enough never to have had his face smashed in.'

<sup>116</sup> Curran, *Hibernian Green On The Silver Screen: The Irish and American Movies*, pp. 39, 41.

Also see, Peter Quinn, *Looking for Jimmy: A Search for Irish America* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2008), p.32. Quinn argues that through his association with Irishness, Cagney epitomises what is known today as 'street smarts', who possess a blend of 'nattiness and charm, of verbal agility and ironic sensibility.'

Also see, Steve Brennan and Bernadette O'Neill, *Emeralds in Tinseltown: The Irish in Hollywood* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 2007), p. 108. Cagney is described by the authors as 'explosive', and viewed as a 'Bantam cock, tough-as-nails street smart wise guy.'

<sup>117</sup>Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 315.

Miller's scenario correlates with McCourt's depiction in *Angela's Ashes* of the family's existence in the tenement block on Classon Avenue, Brooklyn in 1930s New York.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, at the opening of Alan Parker's cinematic adaptation of *Angela's Ashes* an actor's voice (in the guise of McCourt) tells us that his was the only family sailing away from the Statue of Liberty.<sup>119</sup> It is likely that the mise-en-scène of Cagney's films encourage McCourt's recollection of his very early life in New York, particularly as his father drank in the Speakeasy on Atlantic Avenue, even getting drunk and 'forgetting his responsibilities' on McCourt's Baptismal day (pp.6,9). From filmic images McCourt is able to gain a view of the New York of Depression era American and his father's chosen lifestyle. In view of Cagney's rise to iconic status it is significant to McCourt's experience that Cagney has said that he himself grew up 'surrounded by trouble, illness, and my dad's alcoholism, but we didn't have time to be impressed by all those misfortunes.'<sup>120</sup>

As previously highlighted, McCourt associates Cagney with a major landmark in his childhood: 'First Communion day is the happiest day of your life because of The Collection and James Cagney at the Lyric Cinema' (p.141). There is a tension here between the gift of God's spiritual grace, and an earthly bequest. As we saw, Mr Benson directs his disgust at McCourt and his fellow First Communicants because they associate the Sacrament with monetary compensation rather than any heavenly reward. However, McCourt is forced to sneak into the Lyric because his grandmother prevents him from making 'The Collection' contending that he is not a proper Catholic having 'thrun up his First Communion breakfast' to leave her with 'God in me backyard' (p.143). McCourt's recollection implies that he saw *Public Enemy* since he remembers watching a 'thrilling film but with a sad end because James Cagney was a public enemy and when they shot him they wrapped him in bandages and threw him in the door,

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<sup>118</sup>A tenement block similar to the one occupied by the McCourt family has been restored at 97 Orchard Street, New York.

<sup>119</sup> *Angela's Ashes*, directed by Alan Parker, produced by Alan Parker *et al*, Paramount Pictures (1999).

<sup>120</sup> James Cagney, quoted in Steve Brennan and Bernadette O'Neill, *Emeralds in Tinseltown*, p. 110.

shocking his poor old Irish mother, and that was the end of my First Communion day' (p.145). The resonance of this scene in post-Civil War Ireland would be upsetting for women like Kathleen Clarke who had to claim the bodies of her brother Edward (Ned) and her husband, Thomas, both of whom were instrumental in the Easter Rising. The scenario that McCourt recalls places focus upon the fate of many Irish women like Clarke, whose male relatives were involved in rebellion activities, with Cagney's bandaged body becoming a poignant reminder for some Irish spectators.<sup>121</sup> McCourt's grandmother treats the young Frankie as a 'public enemy' by dragging him through the streets to Confession to be absolved of his 'crime'.

Echoing Cagney, therefore, the literary success of *Angela's Ashes* permitted McCourt to bridge the world of emigrant life with that of celebrity to bring the contemporary Irish-American experience to an international audience. Consequently, he is likely to relate the most with those portrayals that reflect what Anthony Burke Smith has referred to as Cagney's 'nuanced [...] public identity as the avatar of aggressive Irish-America.'<sup>122</sup> Hollywood encouraged the American public to accept the Irish community as part of the larger culture and refined their image due to Cagney's place in the spotlight. As Smith contends:

Cagney's genius lay in transforming the figure of pugnacious Paddy of nineteenth-century stereotype into a man of the modern city, compelling as well as threatening [...] because he expressed in body language, diction and pacing the dangerous, unresolved contradictions and ethnic tensions of twentieth-century urban America.<sup>123</sup>

Smith is stressing that although Cagney sustained an Irish-American identity, the new stature that his image projected about Irish-Americans both on screen and in real life, encouraged and assisted them in establishing both a social and cultural space rather than being New York's immigrant outsiders, which of course, played into earlier Irish

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<sup>121</sup> See Kathleen Clarke, *Revolutionary Woman*, ed. by Helen Litton (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1991), p. 70.

<sup>122</sup> Anthony Burke Smith, 'The Mick Irish Turns Federal Agent: James Cagney, G-Men and Ethnic Masculinity', in *Screening Irish-America: Representing Irish-America in Film and Television*, ed. by Ruth Barton (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p. 114.

<sup>123</sup> Smith, 'The Mick Irish Turns Federal Agent: James Cagney, G-Men and Ethnic Masculinity', p. 117.



stereotypes. Cagney is a means of understanding the process of cultural self-identification about what America can be and what emigration can offer, so it is unsurprising that McCourt constructs the happy American cinematic ending in *Angela's Ashes*, aware that the real-life Cagney rose above his class and ethnic status.

### **Frank McCourt: A 'regular Fred Astaire'?**<sup>124</sup>

While Quinn describes Cagney's walk as being an 'evanescent strut' that is 'halfway between a stroll and a dance step', it is Fred Astaire's dancing talents that influence McCourt.<sup>125</sup> In fact, Astaire's indelible screen persona of the avatar of American *bon vivant* results in McCourt's rejection of Irish dance culture in *Angela's Ashes*. When McCourt's father tells him that it is time for him to learn the dances of his ancestors, Frankie makes his choice of Hollywood culture clear: 'I don't want to be Cyril Benson [the star pupil of Irish dancing]. I want to be Fred Astaire.' McCourt's mother and her neighbour, Bridey Hannon, 'turn hysterical, laughing and squirting tea out of their mouths, Jesus love him, says Bridey. Doesn't he have a great notion of himself. Fred Astaire how are you.' McCourt's mother insists that 'Fred Astaire went to his lessons every Saturday and didn't go around kicking the toes out of his boots' and that if McCourt wants to be like Astaire he would have to go to Mrs O'Connor's Irish dance class every week (pp.159-160). McCourt reasons:

If my pals see my mother dragging me through the streets to an Irish dancing class I'll be disgraced entirely. They think it's all right to dance and pretend you're Fred Astaire because you can jump all over the screen with Ginger Rogers. There is no Ginger Rogers in Irish dancing and you can't jump all over (p.157).

It is likely that McCourt is referring to Astaire's performance of 'You're All the World to Me', in *Royal Wedding* in which Astaire's character, Tom Brown, dances all over the walls and ceiling.<sup>126</sup> Hence, this final section examines McCourt's response to the ideological and cultural implications of Astaire's musicals, which create a utopian space

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<sup>124</sup> *Angela's Ashes*, p. 159.

<sup>125</sup> Quinn, 'Looking for Jimmy', in *Making The Irish American*, p. 672.

<sup>126</sup> *Royal Wedding*, directed by Stanley Donan, produced by Arthur Freed, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (1951).

for McCourt, with Astaire himself providing what John Ellis terms 'a synthesis of voice, body and motion', to exemplify how cinema magnifies and illuminates 'heavenly bodies'.<sup>127</sup> Moreover, like memoir itself, the musical directly addresses the audience by breaking the 'fourth wall'.<sup>128</sup> McCourt observes the screen action as if he were witnessing the events from real life, which adopts the same principle as that of the 'autobiographical pact' in relation to memoir.

The musical is a genre that Jane Feuer defines as 'quintessentially Hollywood' or Hollywood 'writ large', epitomising the golden age of the studio era that spanned the coming of sound in 1925 to the television era of the 1950s, and as such became a key moment of cinematic inheritance for McCourt.<sup>129</sup> Maltby and Craven believe that the process of spectator seduction is more visible in the musical because the genre foregrounds a more explicit representation of a fantasy world, signalled by the way in which characters move and behave. Furthermore, in accord with the discussions in Chapter 2, the influence of this alternative type of popular music on McCourt's writings is significant, particularly as it provides an escape from the more pressurised world of the film's narrative, just as the cinema offers its audience the same opportunity for escape from the everyday.<sup>130</sup> McCourt told me in an email: 'My first Fred Astaire: *Top Hat* and that ranks up there with Gene Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain*'.<sup>131</sup> McCourt speaks about his aspirations in the documentary *Home*: 'I wanted glamour. I wanted to be Fred Astaire in a top hat.'<sup>132</sup> This is clearly because many of Astaire's films are set in an affluent Art Deco world where characters not only have money but also the mobility that was denied to so many during The Depression. The frequency with which they

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<sup>127</sup> John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (London: Routledge, 1992[1982]), p. 93.

<sup>128</sup> See Elizabeth S. Bell, *Theories of Performance* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), p. 203.

<sup>129</sup> Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (London: Macmillan, 1993[1982]), p. ix.

<sup>130</sup> Maltby and Craven, *Hollywood Cinema*, p. 39.

<sup>131</sup> Personal email from Frank McCourt, 18 June 2009.

*Top Hat*, directed by Mark Sandrich, produced by Sandro S. Berman, RKO Radio Pictures Incorporated (1935); *Singin' in the Rain*, directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donan, produced by Arthur Freed, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (1952).

*Top Hat* was shown at Limerick's Atheneum cinema in 1941, and again at the Carlton in 1944, as advertised in *The Limerick Chronicle*, 4 January 1941, p. 1, c.2, and 29 January 1944, p. 1, c. 3. *Singin' in the Rain* was screened in 1944, as advertised in *The Limerick Chronicle*, 29 January 1944, p. 1, c.3.

<sup>132</sup> McCourt, *Home*, produced and directed by Dawn Scibilia, written and narrated by Alan Cooke, Home Film Company (2007).

were shown in *Limerick* gave McCourt ample opportunity to become acquainted with Astaire's screen persona.<sup>133</sup>

Although Astaire's manifestation of masculinity differs from that displayed by Wayne and Cagney, McCourt indicates in his writings that Astaire represents a specific type of urbane sophisticated masculinity in which issues of performance and sexual objectification remain central to McCourt's view of Astaire's image. We must now return to the issue of masculinity as 'spectacle' and Neale's argument that although the representation of masculinity, 'both inside and outside the cinema', has rarely been discussed, musicals are the only mainstream genre 'in which the male body has been unabashedly put on display in any consistent way.' Neale substantiates his argument by pointing out that a shoot-out scene can be played down through the aggressive or anxious glances of other male characters, as well as through its use as a device of narrative resolution, specifically designed 'to disavow any explicitly erotic look at the male body.'<sup>134</sup> In light of the discussions in this chapter about Wayne and Cagney's screen personas, Neale's view can be challenged because I have established how the Western and Gangster genres provide an opportunity for the stylised presentation of male bodies. It is more accurate to say that in cinematic terms Astaire's grace is associated with dance and, of course, a heightened awareness of the body. Indeed, Astaire's debonair performance enhances McCourt's angst about both his own physical inadequacy and his lack of ability in rhythmic movement. Likewise, Astaire personifies how Hollywood also ignites a binary representation of masculinity through the objectification of the male star, and he actually connotes Mulvey's term 'to-be-looked-at-ness', and not only as a source of fascination for the female spectator, which

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<sup>133</sup>*Broadway Melody of 1940*, directed by Norman Taurog, produced by Jack Cummings, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (1940). It was screened at The Lyric in 1941 and again in 1944, as advertised in the *Limerick Leader*, 12 December 1941, p. 1, c. 3, and 24 November 1944, p. 1, c. 2.

*Holiday Inn*, produced and directed by Mark Sandrich, Paramount Pictures Incorporated (1942). It was screened at the Grand Central Cinema in 1943, as advertised in the *Limerick Leader*, 12 April 1943, p. 1, c.5.

*Second Chorus*, directed by H.C. Potter, produced by Boris Morros, Robert Stillman and Fred Astaire, National Pictures Corporation (1941). It was screened at the Lyric in 1941, as advertised in the *Limerick Leader*, 24 November 1941, p. 1, cc. 1-3.

<sup>134</sup> Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle', p. 18.

unsettles the stability associated with 'masculinity'. In fact, Neale insists quite rightly that the elements that Mulvey considers in relation to images of women can and should be considered in relation to images of men in musicals because they provide an arena for the appreciation of manly physical performance, whereby the male star becomes 'feminised'.<sup>135</sup>

As the camera keeps in time with the kinetic energy of Astaire's theatrical dance, the young McCourt is seduced by both the music and Astaire's faultless elegance in films that are about the process of ritual courtship and the complicated spectrum of emotions involved. Astaire dances with Ginger Rogers and sings of stars and heaven in natural backdrops like gazebos and parks, in the snow and during thunder and lightening; settings that are far removed from urban reality. This projection of the operations of desire prompts Feuer to single out fantasies of love, harmony and spontaneity.<sup>136</sup> Bruce Babington and Peter Evans are more explicit in contending that Astaire and Rogers's movements relate to 'a whole nexus of ideas about the relation of men and women and the sublimation of sexual drive into romantic love.'<sup>137</sup> In that regard, Hollywood's supposedly sinful nature is the cause of a sermon for McCourt after he truants from his Irish dancing class and spends the tuition fee at the Lyric Cinema. McCourt uses this admonition to point out the misguided attitudes that are entrenched in Catholicism: 'The priest is old and I have to yell my sins at him and he tells me I'm a hooligan for going to the pictures instead of my dancing lessons although he thinks himself that dancing is a dangerous thing almost as bad as the films, that it stirs up thoughts sinful in themselves' (p.161). McCourt reiterated this Catholic teaching in the 2009 issue of *The Southampton Review*: 'And of course they've [the Church] always condemned dancing. You know, you might touch a member of the opposite sex. And you might get excited and you might do something natural.'<sup>138</sup> Nevertheless, Astaire's

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<sup>135</sup> Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle', p. 19.

<sup>136</sup> Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, p. x.

<sup>137</sup> Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Blue Skies and Silver Linings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 105.

<sup>138</sup> McCourt, 'Wit and Wisdom', in *The Southampton Review*, Vol. 111, No. 2 (2009), 207-214 (p. 211).

amorous endeavours are encapsulated in musical numbers that provide escapism for McCourt through a visual style that is characterised by long takes, and medium and long shots that enable McCourt to scrutinise Astaire's full body.

Although dance cannot define or explain, determine or stipulate, it mirrors music in its ability to suggest. Moreover, it taps into a feeling that the psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi has called "flow"; the feeling of synergy, of being alive in the moment.<sup>139</sup> In musicals, the narrative establishes this feeling, music and lyrics can express it, but it is movement that embodies this notion of "flow". Astaire's dance sequences appeal to the audience's imagination through conscious symbolic statements that are communicated through style dynamics and pacing that assist in the unfolding of the story. Astaire's gift for making dancing appear like an involuntary action challenges theatre anthropologist Eugenio Barba's stress upon the importance of skills, energy, and consciousness of rehearsed 'pre-expressive behaviour in an organized performance situation.' From Barba's perspective, Astaire's on-screen speech, gesture, movement and posture, differ from the behaviours of daily life, or 'scenic bios'.<sup>140</sup> According to Barba's notion of 'extra-daily techniques' Astaire's body techniques are learned and designed to break his automatic 'daily' responses, most notably in the graceful action of his hand gestures with the placement of his curled two middle fingers, and the involuntary tapping of his feet. In Astaire's case, Barba's theory can be contradicted because Astaire's culturally determined physicality makes his performance appear natural rather than rehearsed. Thus, the ideology associated with Astaire makes high cultural associations as well as mass entertainment seem natural, so that McCourt does not need to interrogate what he sees at any conscious level.

Astaire exhibits the values and attitudes that are fundamental to his screen persona, displaying a highly stylised visual image of sophisticated yet personalised masculinity,

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<sup>139</sup>See Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996).

<sup>140</sup>Barba, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology*, trans. by Richard Fowler (London: Routledge, 1995[1993]), pp. 9-10, 15.

in which he combines sartorial elegance with a unique dance style. McCourt is surely aware that Astaire's lack of overt physical attractiveness projects an unconventional male image during a period that valued heroic physical strength.<sup>141</sup> However, even if McCourt wishes to emulate Astaire's style, given that their slender and decidedly unmuscular bodies are similar, McCourt lacks the knowledge of how to do so. Indeed, in *'Tis*, Paddy Gilligan tells McCourt to make sure he gets clothes that make him look like an American and not the 'Paddy-from-the-bog stuff' that makes him look like a 'turnip farmer.'<sup>142</sup> It is not that McCourt is uninterested in male equipage; it is simply that he lacks awareness, admitting 'I didn't know how to dress.'<sup>143</sup> Consequently, it is easy to compare Astaire's elegance with McCourt's lack:

Fifth Avenue tells me how ignorant I am [...] If one of [the mannequins] came to life and asked me what kind of fabric she was wearing I wouldn't have a notion. If they wore canvas I'd spot it straightaway because of the coal bags I delivered in Limerick [...] I might be able to recognize tweed [...] I don't know the difference between silk and cotton [...] satin or wool and I'd be lost entirely if challenged to identify damask or crinoline.<sup>144</sup>

McCourt's quandary places a dramaturgical perspective on clothing, indicating how day-to-day roles can be enacted. Steven Cohen draws attention to the 'theatricality' of Astaire's persona, particularly noting the opening of *Easter Parade*, in which Astaire is attired in an especially colourful outfit consisting of a 'grey suit, pink shirt, white vest, blue carnation, black tie, white hankie, pearl tie stud, spats.'<sup>145</sup> Cohen argues further that the focus on Astaire's wardrobe 'insists upon the spectacle of his body in ways that go against the grain of Hollywood's typical treatment of a leading man', while conforming to the genre's concentration on exhibitionism.<sup>146</sup> Since Astaire is positioned in ways that are unusual for the male star, this highlights issues of objectification and

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<sup>141</sup>After Astaire's first screen test the reported evaluation of his talent was: 'Can't act. Can't sing. Balding. Can dance a little.' Quoted by A. Croce in *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book* (New York: Galahad Books, 1972), p. 14.

<sup>142</sup>*'Tis*, p. 35.

<sup>143</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 434.

<sup>144</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 280.

<sup>145</sup>Steven Cohen, "Feminizing" the Song-And-Dance Man: Fred Astaire and the Spectacle of Masculinity in the Hollywood Musical', in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. by Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), 46-69 (p. 62). *Easter Parade*, directed by Charles Walters, produced by Arthur Freed, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (1948).

<sup>146</sup>Cohan, "Feminizing" the Song-And-Dance Man, p. 63.

performance that impact upon his star persona. To contest Cohen's viewpoint, Astaire's sexual image is drawn into the film text because his dance performance underscores his character as a virile, sexually objectified male, thereby challenging traditional cinematic gender roles. Although Mulvey contends that the musical clearly draws attention to the display of the male body, the sexual imagery of the male performer provides a complex re-negotiation of male and female positioning. While Alberta attempts to stage-manage McCourt's persona through his apparel, Astaire's urbane guise and ebullient musical style contrasts with McCourt's morose disposition. McCourt's experience with the Fifth Avenue merchandise substantiates how physical correlatives symbolise mental states. Astaire's hosiery and footwear are designed for the camera's focalisation, although the young McCourt may not be aware of this, or that the camera fragments Astaire's body for the cinematic close up when McCourt watches Astaire perform his mesmerising routines. We can also see how dress functions as an observable marker of class, and how uncomfortable McCourt is in his adopted outer skin. His attempts to placate Alberta accentuate his discomfort and sense of not belonging. In fact, an item of clothing causes conflict when McCourt refuses to put on a tie: 'I don't care what they wear in the Village [...] You're in America now', says Alberta.<sup>147</sup> We see here the literal side of self-fashioning in keeping with the saying 'it is the clothes that make the man.'<sup>148</sup> The subsequent acrimony strengthens McCourt's working-class image further:

She'd want to go antiquing along Atlantic Avenue and I'd want to chat with Sam Colton in his Montague Street bookshop or have a beer at the Blarney Rose with Yonk Kling. Alberta would talk about Queen Anne tables, Regency sideboards, Victorian ewers and I didn't give a fiddler's fart.<sup>149</sup>

Atlantic Avenue was and still is renowned for antiques, while Montague Street is associated with literary figures like Walt Whitman, Henry Miller and Norman Mailer. Through the casual mention of an address McCourt communicates the extent of the

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<sup>147</sup> *Tis*, p. 211.

<sup>148</sup> Quotation from an inscription at the Mark Twain House and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts, visited 7<sup>th</sup> October 2012.

<sup>149</sup> *Tis*, pp. 367-368.

irreconcilable differences between himself and Alberta. The use of the comic Irish idiom 'fiddler's fart' is a challenge to the persona that Alberta attempts to create for McCourt. The fart stands as a metaphor for deflating Alberta's words just as Leopold Bloom's melodious fart does to Robert Emmett's rhetoric in the 'Sirens' episode of *Ulysses*.<sup>150</sup> McCourt says that Alberta's alternate cultural traditions become 'too much for me. I didn't know how to proceed, how to dress, how to chatter [...] how to play squash or golf, how to give a testosteronic handshake.'<sup>151</sup> Again, in concentrating on the body, McCourt is comparing his self-image with Alberta's social ideals. A 'testosteronic handshake' is an affirmation of power and bodily superiority that is part of the visual culture that cinema evokes. However, his failed marriage reflects Hollywood's puerility and foregrounds the 'silver screen' as a limited medium. McCourt's intense discomfiture among those of Alberta's circle also reflects how Hollywood spins its dreams, and the flicker of the screen is a metaphor for the dying flicker of the 'dream factory' in his head before Alberta becomes his nemesis.

In *'Tis*, McCourt constantly affirms that he has little dancing ability, and even though he knows it is a way of attracting girls he says that he 'can barely put one foot before the other.'<sup>152</sup> McCourt's lack of natural rhythm when compared to Astaire's involuntary dancing is further highlighted when he says:

[Emer] dances with me, even though I don't know how [...] I'm twenty years of age and I never in my life took a girl to a dance or a film [...] I don't know anything after growing up in Limerick and listening to priests [...] thundering against dancing [...] Tom and Liam are laughing with Liam telling me a few more nights in the Tuxedo and I'll be a regular Fred Astaire and they all laugh because they know that could never be true.<sup>153</sup>

By using the term 'a regular Fred Astaire' McCourt draws attention to the Irish vernacular with conscious levity, using an intensifier without adding any obvious meaning other than to highlight both Tom and Liam's sarcasm and the impossibility of

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<sup>150</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998[1922]), p. 279.

<sup>151</sup> *'Tis*, p. 367.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.



ever being able to emulate Astaire. McCourt recalls a similar yet more confident approach: 'If [Dolores] and I stumble she steps along with me in such a way that the stumble becomes a dance step and after a while I think I'm Fred Astaire and she's Ginger Rogers.' However, McCourt's newfound poise is short-lived because he trips over someone's walking crutch and lands in the laps of other girls.<sup>154</sup>

McCourt's experiences on the dancefloor are the antithesis of the sexual seduction that Rick Altman highlights in Astaire and Rogers's dualistic pairing that most often informs the structural paradigm to ensure that the spectator will sense the musical's overall patterns without analysis. *Top Hat* belongs to the cluster that Altman categorises as the 'Fairytale Musical', because it transports the spectator into a mythicised version of the cultural past to create a Utopia in which the American Dream is reconstituted. This particular Astaire film emphasises defines 'two become one' symbolically, with the 'Happy Ever After' myth denoting 'mystical connotations of marriage', as the on-screen relationship unfolds through dance.<sup>155</sup> Meanwhile, Feuer uses *Top Hat* to argue that because of its endless reflexivity the musical can offer only entertainment as its version of paradise. Her thesis is founded on a paradox that the musical attempts to recreate the immediacy of live performance whilst actually remaining as a mere recording of actuality. Despite Feuer's argument that the musical divides the human figure into 'splits, doubles and alter egos', when Astaire dances, he is always Fred Astaire, with his 'aura' remaining intact, particularly as Astaire's display of his body becomes inextricable formed within his star image.<sup>156</sup> Because of McCourt's frequent exposure to the fairytale denouement, he is able to assimilate in the light of Astaire and Rogers's paradigmatic relationship that the protagonists accept specific compromises. However, the idea of the fairytale ending is far removed from McCourt's formative experience of romantic couplings, and he grows to realise that Hollywood's world is one of fantasy and that in the real world his differences with Alberta are insurmountable.

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<sup>154</sup> *'Tis*, p. 198.

<sup>155</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (London: British Film Institute, 1989), pp. 272, 336.

<sup>156</sup> Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, p. x.

Because of Limerick's geographical position, McCourt always has Ireland at his back from the shore of the River Shannon, but on the metaphorical horizon is 'America'. This new 'Promised Land' exemplifies Jauss's concept of 'horizon of expectation' since those of McCourt's generation would have had a particular understanding about what 'going to America' meant. This dream is made more palpable through the Limerick Steamship Company's promotion of 'weekly sailings from Limerick to New York' that are advertised prominently in the cinema advertisement columns adjacent to the title banners of the *Limerick Leader* and *Limerick Chronicle*.<sup>157</sup> Thus, although Carter has defined Hollywood as the place where the 'United States perpetrated itself as a universal dream and put the dream into mass production', emigration is the only way of making Hollywood's version of America happen as well as being McCourt's supposed remedy for being distanced from notions of acceptable male identity.<sup>158</sup> As McCourt says in *Home*: 'New York was always the golden city. The skyline [...] is what I always wanted.'<sup>159</sup> In *'Tis*, McCourt recalls boarding the *Irish Oak* and imagining what New York 'would be like.' He 'tr[ies] to see Fifth Avenue or Central Park or Greenwich Village, where everyone looked like movie stars [with their] powerful tans, gleaming white teeth.'<sup>160</sup> New York's street names are invested with a quasi-magical quality for McCourt and are a compilation of associations. Again, McCourt is foregrounding his particular obsession with 'destroyed' teeth and constantly reiterating his awareness of the power of the cinematic 'close up', vowing to 'rush to a dentist' as soon as he 'make[s] some money in America' to have his 'smile mended.' McCourt is influenced by magazines and films that infer that 'the smile opened doors and brought girls running', in a city that the priest whom he meets on the boat brands as being 'one big occasion of sin.'<sup>161</sup> McCourt's fixation with other aspects of his physiognomy; namely

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<sup>157</sup> See Banner headline in *Limerick Leader*, 8 January 1949, p. 1, and *Limerick Chronicle*, 14 January 1941, p. 2.

<sup>158</sup> Carter, 'Robert Coover: A Night at the Movies', in *Shaking A Leg: Journalism and Writings*, p. 385.

<sup>159</sup> McCourt, *Home* (2007).

<sup>160</sup> *'Tis*, p. 4.

<sup>161</sup> *'Tis*, p. 6.

'pimples [...] and fire alarm eyes' are not what he witnesses on screen.<sup>162</sup> McCourt's disquiet about his own appearance not matching Hollywood's cultural coding makes him vulnerable when he returns to New York, particularly as he is the antithesis of what he perceives to be the 'all-American-boy'.<sup>163</sup>

In *Angela's Ashes* McCourt represents his initial reaction to the Manhattan skyline in cinematic terms, purporting to act out the fantasy by placing himself as a character in a film:

I'm on deck the dawn we sail into New York. I'm sure I'm in a film, that it will end and lights will come up in the Lyric Cinema [...] I can pick out the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the Brooklyn Bridge. There are thousands of cars speeding along the roads and the sun turns everything to gold. Rich Americans in top hats white ties and tails must be going home to bed with the gorgeous women with white teeth (p.422).

Apart from the impact of the New York skyline that McCourt affords the reader, the significant aspect of this panoramic view is that he encodes Irving Berlin's lyrics to the title song from *Top Hat*:

I'm puttin' on my top hat,  
Tyin' up my white tie,  
Brushin' off my tails.<sup>164</sup>

In view of McCourt's fondness for *Top Hat*, it is unsurprising that his rite of passage is underscored by references to one of Fred Astaire's most popular song and dance routines in which he is attired in the aforementioned ensemble. Astaire's top hat is also synonymous with the opening titles of *Band Wagon*.<sup>165</sup> Along with his baggy flannels and colourful hosiery, these items are just as much a part of Astaire's iconography as those associated with Wayne and Cagney. Furthermore, in line with Wayne's poised pistol and Cagney's machine gun, Astaire shoots the audience with his walking cane in *Top Hat*.

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>164</sup> 'Top Hat, White Tie and Tales', written by Irving Berlin for *Top Hat* (1935).

<sup>165</sup> *The Band Wagon*, directed by Vincente Minnelli, produced by Arthur Freed, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (1953).

McCourt recaptures the vision of his return to New York in a 1999 interview for *Sixty Minutes*, during which he confesses to expecting the orchestra to play, 'like in the movies', when the sun turned the sky scrapers into pillars of gold.<sup>166</sup> This sense of regeneration by leaving the old world behind reflects McCourt's mood in *Angela's Ashes*, symbolised by the sunlit vista, which is sharply contrasted with the lunar eclipse of his departure from Limerick. However, rather than being a 'bad sign' as asserted by McCourt's Aunt Aggie, his Uncle Pa says: 'Oh, end of the world my arse [...] 'Tis the beginning for Frankie McCourt. He'll come back in a few years with a new suit and fat on his bones like any Yank and a lovely girl with white teeth hangin' from his arm' (p. 420). Soon after arrival, McCourt views the *real* streets of Manhattan as being 'as lively as any film.'<sup>167</sup> McCourt's vision has a resonance with Tom Hayden's remark about the 'Hollywood version' of *Angela's Ashes*. Hayden argues that the stereotyping of the Irish in popular culture is most evident in the way in which a 'Limerick life of poverty, abuse, alcoholism, and seemingly permanent rain gives way to the movie's only scene with sunlight as the young Frank McCourt sails into the New York harbor on the 'Irish Oak' and sees the glowing Statue of Liberty. The luck of the Irish, it seems, is to become American.'<sup>168</sup> McCourt aligns this journey with a sexual conquest that contrasts with his experience with the consumptive Theresa Carmody. His re-entry into America serves as a metaphor for the gateway to manhood because his encounter with the seductress, Frieda, is enabling and invigorating (pp.379,423-4). Indeed, while for some the connotations of the 'Irish Oak' sailing into the New World suggest strength and endurance, for Cornelis Martin Renes the 'Irish Oak's' impressive expanse holds an alternative symbolism. In line with what he calls the 'prudish penetration scene' in the written text, Renes views the ship's name as 'rather phallic' as it 'cleaves the waters of

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<sup>166</sup> Ed Bradley, interview with Frank McCourt for *Sixty Minutes*, originally aired on 19 September 1999, DVD, CBS Broadcasting Inc, produced by Ruth Streeter (2006).

<sup>167</sup> 'Tis, p. 44.

<sup>168</sup> Tom Hayden, *Irish On The Inside: In Search of the Soul of Irish America* (New York: Verso, 2001), p. 18.

the river Hudson towards the Statue of Liberty.<sup>169</sup> Nevertheless, McCourt ends *Angela's Ashes* with his version of the Hollywood happy ending brought about by the pivotal place that Astaire's films hold in the construction of McCourt's memory. To underscore my arguments in Chapter 2, the musical genre exemplifies the power that music has to provoke an emotional response. As Julia Kristeva has said, 'music pluralises meaning', both as an agent of nostalgia and through its power to seduce the audience.<sup>170</sup> Astaire's films investigate ideology while structuring pleasure, and McCourt's spectator experience exemplifies Rick Altman's insistence that the musical creates a paradigm by 'fashioning a myth' out of the courtship ritual, whereby the heterosexual couple are finally resolved by their coming together both in musical numbers and in a closure that answers all the enigmas that the narrative has raised. Altman maintains that this structure re-inforces gender positions in society and represents a way of handling contradictions in general social values.<sup>171</sup> As a spectator, McCourt also experiences an effect that Richard Dyer argues is produced by musicals wherein utopian feelings are created through the energy of human activity, an abundance of spectacle, intensity of emotions and a transparency of true love by the end of the film.<sup>172</sup> Although McCourt acknowledges the impossibility of a utopian space even as he constructs it, the corresponding feelings that cinema evokes remain a constant for him, helping to explain why the medium permeates his writing, and culminates in his own film debut in 2003 as the inebriate schoolteacher, Mr Lennihan, in *Beautiful Kid*.<sup>173</sup> Although by this time McCourt had attained celebrity status, his

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<sup>169</sup> Cornelis Martin Renes, 'The *Quiet Man* and *Angela's Ashes*: Hollywood Representations of Irish Emigration as Male Quest Narrative', in *Estudios Irlandeses*, No. 2 (2007), 93-106 (p. 102).

<sup>170</sup> Julia Kristeva, cited in, *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 52.

<sup>171</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical*, p. 27.

<sup>172</sup> Dyer, 'Entertainment and Utopia', in *Genre: The Musical*, p. 177.

<sup>173</sup> *Beautiful Kid*, directed by Michael Carty and Colum McCann, produced by Patrick McCullough (2003) <<http://www.beautifulkidthemovie.com/page2.htm>> [accessed 2 September 2010].

*Beautiful Kid* released on IMB Video 22 March 2003 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0377036/>> [accessed 2 September 2010]. McCourt is also an associate producer of the film along with his wife, Ellen. A clip from *Beautiful Kid* clip can be seen at *Irish Central*

<[http://www.irishcentral.com/multimedia/video/video\\_selection/?videoID=35e60b369d1e9](http://www.irishcentral.com/multimedia/video/video_selection/?videoID=35e60b369d1e9)> [accessed 14 September 2009].

Personal email from Malachy McCourt, 12 February 2010.

writing illustrates the fascination that exists for the phenomenon of celebrity, not only for the pleasures associated with the institution of cinema but also for cultural and sociological reasons and the tapestry of associations that this chapter considers.

## **Conclusion**

While John Wayne, James Cagney and Fred Astaire serve a specific ideological function in McCourt's memoirs (affording particular prominence to concepts of virile masculinity) they are figures of identification for McCourt. The inevitability of this is recognised by Elizabeth Burns who believes that 'film acting expands the ability of art to explore the varieties of the intimate self.'<sup>174</sup> Like the cinematic story itself, *Angela's Ashes* takes place in three separate but irretrievable intertwined locations of time and space; contemporary America, contemporary Ireland and a narrative reconstruction of the America and Ireland of the past, with McCourt framing his personal history within the reconstruction of his parents' story. George O'Brien has suggested that in *Angela's Ashes* McCourt positions the United States as the 'heroine' of the memoir since New York is the only possible place where he can recuperate from the effects of his Irish childhood.<sup>175</sup> By re-enacting and simulating experiences through cinematic references McCourt affords his audience the experience of collective identification. As Halbwachs has argued: 'A remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present.'<sup>176</sup> The filmic images that transport McCourt's reader to the past illustrate how individual memories are revised, reorganised, updated and even forgotten until evoked by a powerful stimulus. However, since McCourt remembers incidents that are significant to him, the more vulnerable these memories are to being rehearsed, interpreted and then retold. McCourt places cinema in a new context by calling upon it to both construct and maintain his memory recall. He authenticates that remembrance can be a reel of endless images, remnants of happenings, flickering moments of the past that emerge

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<sup>174</sup> Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality* (London: Longman, 1972), p. 196.

<sup>175</sup> O'Brien, 'The Last Word: Reflections on *Angela's Ashes*', p. 247.

<sup>176</sup> Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, p. 69.

as a montage of snippets of an individual life. Given the prominence that McCourt gives to cinema, it is apt that in the period that sadly turned out to be his final weeks, McCourt watched Cagney for the 'zillionth time.'<sup>177</sup>

My analysis in this chapter has illuminated further the extent to which McCourt's performances of identity when 'read', are set in opposition to Wayne, Cagney and Astaire's screen persona and how these three paradigmatic stars work to either deconstruct, or cement essentialist notions of nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, and male vulnerability. I have established how McCourt presents Ireland in terms that Merriman classifies as a 'benighted dystopia', and I have proved that the cinematic images from McCourt's texts allow him to construct a 'miserable' childhood that plays against the promise of what America can offer him.<sup>178</sup> In the next chapter I turn from the cinema to the playhouse and appropriate Merriman's contention that McDonagh and Carr invite modern audiences to laugh at the 'internal outsiders' who populate their plays from a comfortable distance, relieved that "we" have left it all behind.<sup>179</sup> Merriman's persuasive argument permits me to examine the extent to which McCourt relies upon the work of his dramatic predecessors, Dion Boucicault and Seán O'Casey.

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<sup>177</sup> Personal email from Frank McCourt, 18 June 2009.

<sup>178</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, pp. 209, 195, 196.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197, 196.

## Chapter 4

### ***Melodramatic Moments: Investigating McCourt's Debt to Dion Boucicault and Seán O'Casey***

*'There is no happily ever after in Sean O'Casey'*<sup>1</sup>

The previous chapter provided evidence of how the utopian images that Frank McCourt absorbs from Hollywood films sustain him throughout his childhood by providing a means of escape from the dystopic realism of Limerick. My research attested to how the fantasy figures of John Wayne, James Cagney and Fred Astaire allow McCourt to recollect and explore the problematic issue of Irish-American masculinities. I turn to another set of performative influences in this chapter and restructure Merriman's argument that the theatre has long been the location for debating the meaning of the Irish nation because theatre and nation are 'intertwining systems of representation and interpretation.'<sup>2</sup> I make the case that McCourt's life-writing owes a debt to the literary and performative predecessors Seán O'Casey and Dion Boucicault because they provide characters that are in some way archetypal and allow McCourt to emulate certain stylistic features that appeal to his readership. Furthermore, McCourt's international success was augmented precisely because the economic boom in Ireland facilitated the potential for him to sell a tale of Irish poverty. I argue that by resurrecting his version of the past at a time of increased global popularity of 'Irishness', McCourt validates that 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland's re-branding is antithetical to the Ireland that is associated with the time of production and publication of *Angela's Ashes*. I evaluate how, in Merriman's terms, McCourt 'plunders' an 'antique hoard of quirky dated images' developed from a set of melodramatic themes that derive from the realm of the Irish playhouse.<sup>3</sup> In the first instance, I assess how O'Casey's famous Dublin trilogy, that is, *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), rely on the work of the Dublin-born dramatist Dion Boucicault to underscore Cleary's

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<sup>1</sup> *Tis*, pp. 154–155. McCourt is acknowledging readily his familiarity with O'Casey's account of life in the Dublin tenements.

<sup>2</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.



argument that O'Casey's 'eclectic [...] theatrical conventions [are] considerably indebted to nineteenth-century melodrama.'<sup>4</sup> In turn, a textual analysis of selected scenes in McCourt's work permits me to consider the ways in which he draws on O'Casey's aforementioned 'Irish' plays. The chapter goes on to consider that even at the same time that McCourt's characters and dialogue echo O'Casey, McCourt's methodology brings him closer to the purpose of Boucicault's original writing. Boucicault, after all, cannily sought to evoke the Fenian atrocities of the late 1800s in a way that might, nevertheless, allow his plays to appeal to an international set of spectators – in Ireland and the U.S.A., as well as in Britain, adapting his writing to suit a particular audience. For example, Boucicault's *The Poor of New York* became *The Poor of Liverpool* to satisfy his English audience, and his three 'Irish' plays – consisting of *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864) and *The Shaughraun* (1874) – exemplify his artfulness in employing topical issues within a global market, firmly establishing the stock characters and standard themes associated with 'Irishness'.

The second part of the chapter examines McCourt's acting roles to substantiate my contention that he was a well-practiced performer who was acutely aware of the effective use of dramatic tropes. Though McCourt has never alluded to his experience of acting in either his memoirs or any interview, in reality he was highly familiar with O'Casey's dramas, having played Johnny Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock* in New York's Irish National Theatre Group's production of the 1957-58 season and even directing a production of *Juno*.<sup>5</sup> The absence of such discussion in McCourt's memoirs perhaps provides a tacit disavowal of influence in the same way that O'Casey claimed of his own plays 'there isn't sight or sound of Boucicault in any of them.'<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, McCourt's intimate knowledge of stage performances has led to ideas from the public playhouse appearing in his work. McCourt joined the Irish Repertory Theatre after his retirement in 1990, and as I will demonstrate, this was the venue where McCourt's

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<sup>4</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 235.

<sup>5</sup> Personal emails from Frank McCourt, 17 and 18 December 2008.

<sup>6</sup> David Krause, ed., *The Letters of Sean O'Casey Letters IV* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), p. 339.

writing for performance was first staged, nurturing his involvement with a theatrical organisation that produced both Boucicault and O'Casey's plays frequently.<sup>7</sup> McCourt's immersion in performance and dramatic artistry implies that his literary success was not as unlikely as it first appeared with the publication of *Angela's Ashes* 'out of nowhere' in 1996.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, his later writings are able to toy with the melodramatic techniques that he employs in his breakthrough work, *Angela's Ashes*. The subsequent *Tis* and *Teacher Man* have attracted readers who were familiar with the first book, and who had consequently acquired Jauss's concept of 'horizon of expectation' through their familiarity with the form and content of *Angela's Ashes*.<sup>9</sup> Hence, I argue that the later texts that McCourt wrote offer a self-conscious recycling of the melodramatic tropes that had become widely associated with his work.

In the nineteenth century, Boucicault was one of the most popular stage writers in the Anglophone world, and his plays provided a set of ideas about the theatre for successors either to distance themselves from or develop further.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory used the stage of the Abbey Theatre to show Irish audiences something different from Boucicault's melodramas, with Yeats claiming that since the Irish people were 'weary of misrepresentation [...] we will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, but the home of an ancient idealism.'<sup>11</sup> In a 1901 editorial essay in *Samhain*, Yeats held Boucicault up as the representative of all that was distasteful in melodrama, decrying the Boucicaultian influence on aspiring

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<sup>7</sup> McCourt confirmed by email on 17 December 2008 that the Irish National Theatre Group was the first acting group that he was involved with in New York in the late 1950s.

Ciarán O'Reilly and Charlotte Moore founded the Irish Repertory Theatre in September 1988 as the only year-round theatre company in New York City devoted to staging the work of 'Irish and Irish American masters' and contemporary playwright. It opened with a production of O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*. <<http://www.irishrep.org/mission.htm>> [accessed 1 February 2009].

<sup>8</sup> See, The Associated Press, 'Frank McCourt, Irish Author of 'Angela's Ashes,' dies at 78', <[http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2009/07/frank\\_mccourt\\_irish\\_author\\_of.html](http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2009/07/frank_mccourt_irish_author_of.html)> [accessed 31 January 2014].

<sup>9</sup> Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, pp. 23-25.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Kelleher, 'Prose writing and drama in English, 1830-1890: From Catholic Emancipation to the fall of Parnell', in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, Vol. I to 1890, ed. by Margaret Kelleher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 449-499 (p. 487). Kelleher observes that melodrama was the most popular form of Victorian theatre with Dion Boucicault being the most renowned Irish exponent. For an account of Boucicault's remonstrance against the figure of the stage Irishman see, Carl Wittke *The Irish in American* (Rouge Louisiana State University Press, 1956), p. 258. Boucicault said: 'England lies when she brands Ireland as a nation of whiskey-drinking, fight-loving vagabonds.'

<sup>11</sup> W.B. Yeats, quoted in Lady Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (New York: Capricorn, 1965), p. 9.

Irish dramatists: 'If [they] had studied the romantic plays of Ibsen [...] they would not have sent the Irish Literary Theatre imitations of Boucicault' who, according to Yeats had 'no relation to literature.'<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in an October 1901 letter to Lady Gregory, Yeats despaired of audiences who preferred Boucicault's plays to those of the Irish Literary Theatre, which Yeats believed was 'going through all sorts of trouble and annoyance for a [...] body of ignoramuses who prefer Boucicault [...] to us.'<sup>13</sup> Yet at the end of the twentieth century, McCourt reverts to Boucicault's brand of 'Irishness' in a conscious bid to recreate the marketable image of the traditional stage Irish stereotype.

Boucicault's spectacle-laden works express what Cheryl Herr describes as 'excessive' visible and audible signs, and I argue that McCourt seeks to transpose these effects into his non-playhouse-based prose writing through a process of vivid image-making.<sup>14</sup> In particular, he relies upon a stage Irishman of the Boucicaultian type that is mediated, for McCourt, through the work of O'Casey. McCourt has also been influenced by O'Casey's foregrounding of the emotional resonance of the maternal figure, and this is also something that can be traced through to the nineteenth-century influence of Boucicault. Of course, O'Casey's drama often takes a more polemical approach than that of Boucicault, angering many later nationalists by portraying cynicism about republican activities, and earning himself the label of a proto-revisionist, as well as the dislike of critics from Hanna Sheehy Skeffington to Seamus Deane.<sup>15</sup> Hasia Diner deems that while *Arrah-na-Pogue* and *The Shaughraun* dramatised a form of

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<sup>12</sup> Yeats, 'Windlestraws', in *Samhain*, No. 1 (October 1901), 3,10.

<sup>13</sup> John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard, eds., *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats, Volume 3, 1901-1905* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 117-118.

<sup>14</sup> Cheryl Herr, *For the Land They Loved: Irish Political Melodramas, 1890-1925* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), p. 13. Herr foregrounds the 1983 exhibit on 'Dion Boucicault and the Irish Melodram Tradition', at Dublin's Irish Theatre Archive, which emphasises the debts that later playwrights owed to Boucicault as well as the similarities between 'Boucicault's wily shaughrauns' and O'Casey's 'paycocks'. Also see, Richard Pine, ed., *Dion Boucicault and the Irish Melodrama Tradition as Prompts*, 6, special issue (Dublin: September 1983).

<sup>15</sup> See, Robert Hogan, *et al*, eds., *The Modern Irish Drama: A Documentary History*, 6 vols. (Dublin: Dolman, 1954-1974), Vol. VI, pp. 300-301.

Seamus Deane, 'Irish Politics and O'Casey's Theatre', in *Threshold 24* (1973), pp. 5-16

Also see Richard Fawkes, *Dion Boucicault: A Biography* (London: Quartet Books, 1979), 122-3.

Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 218-247.

subversion of England's dominant control of Ireland, they did not suggest 'a permanent solution to Ireland's colonial subjugation and they did not pose any real threat to the colonial hierarchy.' Rather than being 'politically seditious' these two plays provided Victorian audiences with a fantasy world or an imagined Ireland that could not pose a threat in the real world of English political reality.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, 'the famine queen' Victoria, as well as many Dublin nationalists, found themselves enamoured by Boucicault's work.<sup>17</sup>

McCourt, like Boucicault, sought to author best-selling works that would not risk alienating an assortment of international audiences, undertaking what Nicholas Grene has called 'acting out the false stereotypes of foreign expectations.'<sup>18</sup> Drama is a means of either perpetuating or changing self-image because of the dynamic exchange between audience, performer and playwright. Yet, the audience sees caricatured types through the lens of what came before or is familiar, because stereotypes are often rooted in reality and become interiorised by the spectator. Boucicault's stage Irish figure remained within the well-established formula that had been created on the English stage, thereby catering to audience expectations. As Grene argues, Boucicault deployed the 'romantically pro-Fenian *Shaughraun*' to 'court' Irish-America in the country where the movement began. According to Grene, New York joined London in 'applaud[ing]' the same Fenian *Shaughraun*, thus demonstrating Boucicault's skill in appealing to the 'inherited sentimental patriotism of Irish-Americans', while allaying

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<sup>16</sup> Hasia R. Diner, "'The Most Irish City in the Union': The Era of the Great Migration, 1844-1877", in *The New York Irish*, ed. by Roland H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 87-106 (p. 92).

Also see, Christopher Morash, *The History of Irish Theatre 1601-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 91-93. Morash illustrates how *The Shaughraun* belongs to the tradition in Irish theatre that uses two key conventions to works towards the resolution of political antagonisms – the conciliatory ending and the rebel hero. He also contends that *The Colleen Bawn* was so successful as a commercial commodification of Ireland that it actually represented the start of the internationalisation of Irish drama.

<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of the play's popularity see Nicholas Daly, 'The Many Lives of the Colleen Bawn: Pastoral Suspense', in *Journal of Victorian Culture* 12:1 (2007), pp. 1-25. Queen Victoria saw *The Colleen Bawn* three times during February and March 1861, and it was the last play she saw before her long mourning after the deaths (in quick succession) of her mother and husband. See Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1999]), p. 8.

See Maud Gonne, 'The Famine Queen', in *The United Irishman*, 7 April 1900, p. 5. Gonne's anti-Imperial writing places culpability for famine, evictions, starvation and emigrations on the English Queen who she writes has 'hypnotized the world with the falsehood of her greatness.'

<sup>18</sup> Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama*, pp. 7, 17, 49.

'the fears of the English' and 'satisfying the national self-esteem of the Irish', be they Nationalist, Unionist, Protestant or Catholic.<sup>19</sup> In a similar way, although an ardent nationalist might be able to laugh at the mocking stereotypes that surround the Northern Irish father-figure in McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes*, a Unionist can equally well see the repetition of such absurd stereotypes (such as the identification of 'Presbyterian hair') as evidence of the closed-minded, bigoted and economically envious Irish Free State in the mid-twentieth-century. Textual examples provide evidence that McCourt's writings, like those of Boucicault, do draw on a melodramatic narratives that are deeply embedded within the context of Irish colonial history, but do so in a way that might be equally amenable to an assortment of readers holding different, and indeed mutually exclusive, political perspectives.

By way of contrast, Frank O'Connor regards *The Plough and the Stars* as O'Casey's most directly political play and suggests that he wrote it for the very reason that it deals with the Irish Citizen Army; the organisation that O'Casey 'gave the biggest part of his big heart to.'<sup>20</sup> The title is regarded as both a symbolic gesture of protest and perceived as a betrayal of the men and women of 1916. Moreover, O'Casey's sceptical view of Pádraig Pearse's militant nationalism and ridicule of his 'heroic' rhetoric was seen as a audacious attack when O'Casey appropriated Pearse's words in an incongruous off-stage rally that calls the people in the pub to die gloriously for Ireland.<sup>21</sup> O'Casey juxtaposes the contrasting spaces of stage and the outside world of high-minded politics, articulated by the 'Figure in the Window', against the domestic arena. The Figure's disembodied voice can be seen as an abstract melodramatic symbol since shadows are ominously threatening, and like Rosie Redmond, the speaker is another version of the seducer of men. As the Covey points out, 'more die o' consumption than are killed in th' wars.'<sup>22</sup> Of course, O'Casey's model is manifested in

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<sup>19</sup> Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama*, pp. 9, 17, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Frank O'Connor, *The Backward Look: A Survey of Irish Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 219.

<sup>21</sup> See James Moran, *Staging the Easter Rising: 1916 as Theatre* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2005), pp. 30-54.

<sup>22</sup> O'Casey, *The Plough and the Stars* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), Act IV, p. 88.

McCourt's father's call for his own sons to 'die for Ireland'. However, rather than preparing for battle, O'Casey's tenement dwellers engage in petty arguments about prostitution, political bravado and respectability that make a mockery of both socialist and nationalist ideals. Similarly, O'Casey contrasts the romantic idealism that is embodied by Jack Clitheroe with the real heroism and suffering of Dublin civilians. Nonetheless, the way that O'Casey mediates Boucicault's techniques for twentieth-century Dublin audiences while injecting real politics is also seen in Boyle's last speech in *Juno and the Paycock*, which includes the key word 'chassis', to confirm O'Casey's belief that the civil war caused widespread turmoil.<sup>23</sup> O'Casey refuses consistently to glorify the violence of the nationalist cause and in contrast to the Covey's sentiments, projects the theme that dead heroes are far outnumbered by dead innocent people.

### **'Melos' in O'Casey and McCourt**

Peter Brooks is credited by critics such as Elizabeth Butler Cullingford with pioneering melodrama's re-conception since Brooks argues that it is singularly modern mode of expression as opposed to the more pejorative and restrictive view of melodrama being outdated and lowbrow.<sup>24</sup> At its most general level the word 'melodrama' is derived from 'melos' (music+drama); 'song-drama' in Greek, to identify a dramatic narrative with

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<sup>23</sup> O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, in *Modern Irish Drama*, ed. by John P. Harrington (London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991), pp. 204-254, (Act III, p. 245).

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, 'National Identities in Performance: The Stage Englishman of Boucicault's Irish Drama', in *Theatre Journal* 49.3 (October 1997), 287-300 (p. 292). Cullingford contends that Brooks has rescued melodrama from its 'critical doldrums' by revaluing precisely those formal elements that have most embarrassed academic commentators.

See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 14,41,48-49,56. Brooks perceives that melodrama's juxtapositioning of realism and an aesthetic of 'muteness' produces a 'moral occult', resulting from a need to understand ideological and psychological issues that are relevant to modern lives.

Also see David Mayer and Matthew Scott, *Four Bars of 'Agit', Incidental Music for Victorian and Edwardian Melodrama* (London: Samuel French, 1983), p. 16. Mayer and Scott have observed that 'relatively simple' music was crucial in Romantic melodrama, delineating the extremes and contrasts of performance, holding the audience 'rapt', and helping them to concentrate in a noisy theatre by informing the audiences' understanding and manipulated their emotions.

Also see, Mayer, 'The Music of Melodrama', in *Performance and Popular Drama: Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film and Television, 1800-1976*, ed. by David Bradbury, et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 49-63 (pp. 49-51, 63). Mayer characterises music as having 'emotive powers' contending that it is 'an affecting and effecting device to underline and emphasise the emotional content of a play's action.'

musical accompaniment.<sup>25</sup> With regard to 'melos', McCourt would be aware that Boucicault adapts the 'The Wearing of The Green' in *Arrah-na-Pogue*.<sup>26</sup> In turn, O'Casey echoes Boucicault's use of music by having Brennan whistle softly 'The Soldier's Song' in *The Plough and the Stars* and a more intense yet succinct symbol of martyrdom is enacted when Tommy Owens sings 'God Save Ireland' in *The Shadow of a Gunman*.<sup>27</sup> Owens becomes the hero midway through the line: 'God save Ireland ses we all', as the pronoun 'we' constructs an identification that is enhanced by the Dublin dialect, with the martyrs' actions becoming deeds of honour on behalf of Ireland. Furthermore, O'Casey's initial audience would have recognised the tune and lyrics that call forth dead Irish heroes who are beneficial to the nationalist ideology, since the sentiments promise glory and immortality to the sacrificial victims, preserving their honour and memory through circulation and repetition. However, the sentiment of 'God save Ireland ses we all' is undercut by Owens's self-constructed heroism; a performance in which O'Casey critiques the cowardice, indifference and apathy of the tenement dwellers in *Gunman*. Within this overt political statement, O'Casey suggests that this may be caused by a fear of both current events and of the future, a trepidation that is shared by Irish nationalists and British loyalists alike. By having Minnie Powell die for the intellectual Donal Davoreen (a coward whom she thought was a patriot), as well as the religious Seumas Sheilds and the self-styled hero, Tommy Owens, O'Casey highlights the ideology that false heroism promotes. In particular, the transparency of the song's sentiment and Owens's flawed aspirations are emphasised through an avowal of Minnie's own nationalism and her rhetorical question: 'Wouldn't that Tommy Owens give you the sick — only waitin to hear the call! Ah, then it'll take all the brass bands in the country to blow the call before Tommy Owens ud hear it.'<sup>28</sup> O'Casey presents Owens's constructed self most clearly through Owens's tearful yet

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<sup>25</sup>Baldrick, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, p. 150.

<sup>26</sup>Boucicault, 'The Wearing Of The Green', from *Arrah-na-Pogue*, in David Krause, ed., *The Dolman Boucicault*, Act I, p. 133.

<sup>27</sup>O'Casey, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, in *Seven Plays By Sean O'Casey*, selected by Ronald Ayling (London: Macmillan, 1985), 1-44 (Act, I, p. 15).

O'Casey, *The Plough and the Stars*, Act I, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup>O'Casey, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, Act I, p. 15.

hollow assertion that although he would 'die for Ireland', he has not yet joined the dead heroes of whom he sings because 'I never got a chance — they never gave me a chance.'<sup>29</sup>

As Chapter 2 has revealed, Owens's sentiments are echoed by McCourt's father who fosters heroic illusions through the nationalistic songs 'Kevin Barry' and 'Roddy McCorley' and by repeatedly vowing that he wants his sons 'ready for the day that Ireland will be free from the center to the sea' (p.18). McCourt's father attempts to exercise control over his own identity and his environment through the oral performance of an illusory valiant status, and his sentiments about wanting his sons to die for Ireland are a clear re-imagining of Owens's cry: 'Why isn't any man in Ireland out with the IRA? Up with the barricades, up with the barricades!'<sup>30</sup> Annelise Truninger believes that the comic elements in *Juno* echo those of Boucicault's sentimentalism, through the inclusion of songs and the dramatic structure and even in some of the character traits. By having Joxer sing 'Willie Reilly' and 'The Colleen Bawn', O'Casey integrates songs into the motifs of the play rather than using them as 'adornments'.<sup>31</sup> Here we can see how both diegetic and non-diegetic music operates as a defining element of the very term melodrama, being as essential as speech and gesture to Boucicault and O'Casey's melodramatic productions. O'Casey follows Boucicault in incorporating the melody of a well-known song to add further clarification to the unfolding of the story in terms of duration, pacing and interpretation, as well as an accompaniment to the on-stage action. This performance device helps audiences to concentrate in a noisy theatre by holding their rapt attention through the characteristic gestures of melody, harmony and instrumentation.<sup>32</sup> More specifically music in melodrama evokes atmosphere, accompanies scene changes and, when employed as a leit-motif, marks the entrances and exits of individual characters. Furthermore, it

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<sup>29</sup> O'Casey, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, Act I, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Act I, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Annelise Truninger, *Paddy and the Paycock: A Study of the Stage Irishman from Shakespeare to O'Casey*, The Cooper Monographs; Theatrical Physiognomy Series, 24 (Berne: Franke, 1976), pp. 110-112.

<sup>32</sup> See David Mayer and Matthew Scott, *Four Bars of 'Agit', Incidental Music for Victorian and Edwardian Melodrama* (London: Samuel French, 1983) 1-6, (p. 1-2).



punctuates or underscores dialogue, and can shift the mood of a scene rapidly, while creating the effect of a flashback or anticipation of future events, while alerting the audience to off-stage action.

Peter Brooks recognises the centrality of music to the expression of emotion in melodrama: 'Music seems to have been called upon whenever the dramatist wanted to strike a particular emotional pitch or coloring and lead the audience into a change or heightening of mood.'<sup>33</sup> More explicitly, Brooks claims that emotional drama needs the tones and registers of musical language to evoke the 'ineffable', and bridge the interpretational gap.<sup>34</sup> Brooks is maintaining that discourse is incommensurate with the forms of feeling that certain music embodies and conveys and that profound emotions can only be expressed through audible qualities rather than prose descriptions. Meanwhile, David Mayer characterises music as having 'emotive powers' that act as an affecting and effecting device to underline and emphasise the emotional content of the melodramatic action.<sup>35</sup> Both Brooks and Mayer are stating that although music may be able to suggest emotion successfully, its non-specificity allows it to 'transcend' speech or gesture enabling melodrama to be defined aptly as a dramatic narrative with musical accompaniment that punctuates the emotional effects. The sensations expressed are inextricably bound up with the unambiguous moral aspect of melodrama. My analysis uncovers the ways in which McCourt appropriates Boucicault and O'Casey's method of juxtaposing visual and aural effects to heighten emotional extremes and to amplify melodrama's impact. In particular, he follows O'Casey in deploying music to delineate the specific character that he gives to his father, as well as using musical allusions and references to emphasise and interpose dialogue and to evoke atmosphere. The audience produces meaning on the basis of the text, and McCourt produces meaning in his writing through the use of cliché and

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<sup>33</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> David Mayer, 'The Music of Melodrama', in *Performance and Popular Drama: Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film and Television, 1800-1976*, ed. by David Bradbury, Louis James, and Bernard Sharratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 49-63, (pp. 49-5, 63).

characterisation. He is aware that meaning is created through the interplay of melodrama's 'excessive' visible and audible signs that speak to and reflect the desires, concerns and anxieties of the audience.

### **Dion Boucicault: O'Casey's 'God'**<sup>36</sup>

In one volume of his autobiographies O'Casey reveals his knowledge of Boucicault's dramas of 'authentic' Irish life and character, recalling watching his brother, Archie, play the part of Harvey Duff in *The Shaughraun*.<sup>37</sup> From the early 1890s O'Casey himself acted in Boucicault's plays, declaring, 'Shakespeare's good in bits, but for colour and stir give me Boucicault.'<sup>38</sup> O'Casey says that he played Dr Doonan in *The Shaughraun* in the The Mechanics' Theatre that stood on what was to become the site of the Abbey Theatre.<sup>39</sup> Several critics have noted Boucicault's influence. For example, Christopher Murray argues that it was to come in O'Casey's use of:

song, of comedy [...] somewhat stagey characters [...] invariably pitting light against dark, decency against villainy, high spirits against snivelling subordinates of powerful, corrupt forces in authority. [...] O'Casey as playwright was to outstrip Boucicault by shifting from Victorian illusionism to twentieth-century social and political realism.<sup>40</sup>

Boucicault's considerable impact on O'Casey's writing is also noted by David Krause, particularly the depiction of the stage Irishman, who along with the Chinaman and the comic negro (often played by the same actor) became a 'recurring' stock figure in popular theatre (particularly American stage and vaudeville) by the late nineteenth

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<sup>36</sup> See Gerard A. Larson, 'An Interview with Mrs Sean O'Casey', in *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (October 1965), 234-239 (pp. 235, 238). O'Casey's widow, Eileen, defined Boucicault as O'Casey's 'God'.

<sup>37</sup> O'Casey, *Autobiographies* (2 vols.), (London: Macmillan, 1963), Vol. 2, p. 143. O'Casey says it was also the first Boucicault play that he saw, p. 246.

<sup>38</sup> O'Casey quoted in Charles Spencer's review of *The Shaughraun* at the Albert Theatre, Dublin 'Irish Stew of Silly Walks and Gurning', in *The Telegraph*, 10 June 2005  
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3643484/Irish-stew-of-silly-walks-and-gurning.html>> [accessed 4 May 2012].

<sup>39</sup> O'Casey, *Autobiographies* 1 (London: Pan Books, 1980), p. 307.

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Murray, *Sean O'Casey Writer at Work: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004) p. 45. O'Casey and his brother, Isaac, acted out Boucicault's plays.

century.<sup>41</sup> O'Casey's version is made manifest in his creation of the braggart "paycock", Captain Jack Boyle, and the cunning parasite, Joxer Daly, through which the spirit of [Boucicault's] Conn the Shaughraun lives again. Like Conn, who 'nivir did an honest day's work in his life', Boyle avoids employment and is exposed by the clever flatterer, Joxer Daly, as an 'infernal rogue an' damned liar.'<sup>42</sup> It seems a critical cliché to situate O'Casey's clowns within categories. For example, Krause places Shields, Fluther Good, Boyle and Bessie Burgess under the category, 'wise fools'.<sup>43</sup> Conversely, while Stephen Watt traces their origins to the typical comic Irishman of the English and Irish stage, he believes that O'Casey deconstructs that characterisation and refers to the paradoxical element in O'Casey's clowns. Watt contends that O'Casey's comic characters, particularly in *The Plough*, are too complex to be comfortably filed under a convenient label, and it is their paradoxical complexity, the mixture of funny and unfunny, which makes them emotionally moving while adding to the singular, tragicomic quality of O'Casey's plays.<sup>44</sup>

In the meantime, H.L. Mencken, attributes the 'brogue' and its new influx of 'Irishism' to the enormous popularity of Boucicault's 'Irish' plays that encouraged the absorption of Irish pronunciation and elements of syntax and grammar into the American language.<sup>45</sup> O'Casey emulates Boucicault's use of idiosyncratic Irish-inflected version of the English language ('divil' and 'shuparriors' from *Arragh-na-Pogue* and 'dhop of wather' from *The Colleen Bawn*) while using malapropisms for comic effect, such as Boyle's 'chassis', 'pereeogative' and 'attackey case' with its 'dockyments'.<sup>46</sup> Similarly,

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<sup>41</sup> David Karuse, 'The Theater of Dion Boucicault', in *The Dolmen Boucicault*, ed. by David Krause (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1964[1864]), 9-47 (pp. 39, 43-46). Krause dedicates this anthology to Sean O'Casey.

<sup>42</sup> Boucicault, *The Shaughraun*, in *The Dolmen Boucicault*, ed. by David Krause, 174-253 (Act I, p. 187). O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, Act III, p. 245.

<sup>43</sup> Krause, *The Profane Book of Irish Comedy* (London: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 245.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Watt, *Joyce, O'Casey and the Irish Popular Theatre* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1964), p. 149.

<sup>45</sup> H.L. Mencken, *The American Language* (New York: Knopf, 1919), p. 93.

<sup>46</sup> Boucicault, *Arragh-na-Pogue*, in *The Dolman Boucicault*, Act I, p. 113 and Act 2, p. 143.

Boucicault, *The Colleen Bawn*, in *The Dolman Boucicault*, Act III, p. 86.

O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, Act I, p. 215, 212; Act II, p. 224.

Also see Colbert Kearney, *The Glamour of Grammar: Orality and Politics and the Emergence of Sean O'Casey* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), pp. 75, 96. Kearney also highlights Boyle's references to his 'attackey case' and his 'dockyments'.

O'Casey allows Daly to entertain as Boyle's comic counterpart in his response to Boyle's philosophical questions, 'what is the stars?' and 'what is the moon?'<sup>47</sup> Although nonsensical, Joxer sustains the illusion that these are vital considerations while demonstrating both the Bakhtinian notion of 'dialogic imagination' and the Williamsian idea of improvisational 'play' as a means of subverting purposeful statement.<sup>48</sup> This circumlocutive form of language is O'Casey's method of exposing the excesses of his characters, showing that their self-deceiving dreams are evaporated by alcohol and poverty. Robert Hogan believes that Boucicault paved the way for O'Casey to present a more realistic view of life than was usually offered by the stage: 'O'Casey took from Boucicault not only the perception about comedy and tragedy existing together, but also a high verve, a delight in flamboyant language, in color, in dance, in music, and in spectacle.'<sup>49</sup> Cleary extends this argument succinctly by saying that O'Casey's 'heterogeneous mix of popular dramatic genres [is] very different to the restrained decorum of Ibsen or Chekhov's well-made plays.'<sup>50</sup> Hogan and Cleary are stressing that O'Casey introduced a new world of working-class city dwellers to the Irish stage, moving away from the "poetic" drama of the Irish Literary Theatre that was championed by Yeats and Lady Gregory. O'Casey favoured a naturalist representation of Dublin working-class characters that were forced to confront the harsh realities of everyday life at the time of profound political and civil unrest. As Cleary says, although the historical action takes place offstage and appears remote and alien, it 'eventually breaches the stage enclosure to shatter the vulnerable domestic world it contains.'<sup>51</sup>

In Truninger's opinion, while Boyle is a stage Irishman, O'Casey no longer uses this stereotype for the amusement of an English audience, but to 'hold up the mirror to an

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<sup>47</sup> O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, Act I, p. 223.

<sup>48</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-422. Bakhtin contends that language evolves dynamically and is affected by and affects the culture that produces and uses it, and that there is no language that is not caught up in definite social relationships. Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 163-64.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Hogan, *Dion Boucicault* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969), pp. 110-111.

<sup>50</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 142.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

Irish one.’ For example, Boyle is ‘so self-centered’ that he brags even in the presence of sorrow and death.<sup>52</sup> Of course, this mirrors Boucault’s intention of exploiting racial stereotypes by elevating the stage Irishman from a ‘comic turn’ to the position of an impertinent, transgressive character to shift the emphasis from wit at the expense of the Anglo-Irish/Englishman to the Irishman himself. Even so, Truninger is highlighting that although O’Casey mirrors Boucault in leaning towards caricature by emphasising and exaggerating conspicuous ‘Irish’ traits, there is a marked difference. O’Casey responds to an age of social and political turmoil in Ireland. Through the comic scenes in *Juno*, he resists subtly an insulting intrusion into the historical conscience of Dublin society by tempering the tragedy with comedy. However, O’Casey’s dramatisation of disorder and family breakdown in *Juno* allows little optimism for the ordinary people of whom he writes because he does not divorce theatre from reality and has said: ‘The people are the theatre [...] Every art is rooted in the life of the people – what they see, do, how they hear, all they touch and taste; how they live, love, and go to the grave.’<sup>53</sup> O’Casey’s methodology paved the way for McCourt to do the same.

### **McCourt’s Stage Irishry and His Debt to O’Casey**

McCourt has claimed O’Casey as one of his literary influences, specifically mentioning that O’Casey’s father was a Protestant from Limerick who faced discrimination; a fact that O’Casey makes much of in the first part of the autobiographies: ‘Out of Limerick he had come, walking the roads to find a job.’<sup>54</sup> In turn, McCourt recalls in *Angela’s Ashes* how his father ‘goes for long walks, miles into the country’, asking farmers for work when no person in Limerick will hire him (p.102). McCourt also provides evidence in *’Tis* of his familiarity with O’Casey’s work (particularly *I Knock at the Door*), while claiming a further affinity:

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<sup>52</sup> Truninger, *Paddy and the Paycock: A Study of the Stage Irishman from Shakespeare to O’Casey*, pp. 110-112.

Also see O’Casey, quoted in Ronald G. Rollins, *Sean O’Casey’s Drama: Verisimilitude and Vision* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1979), p. 121. O’Casey has defined Boyle as ‘an Irish Narcissus’, since he is self-absorbed and irresponsible, ‘intent upon personal glory.’

<sup>53</sup> O’Casey, *Under A Coloured Cap* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 213.

<sup>54</sup> O’Casey *Autobiographies* 1, p. 26.

There is no happily ever after in Sean O'Casey [...] He's the first Irish writer I ever read who writes about rags, dirt, hunger, babies dying.\* The other writers go on about farms and fairies and the mist that do be on the bog and it's a relief to discover one with bad eyes and a suffering mother.<sup>55</sup>

O'Casey's plays were produced on Broadway a number of times between the 1950s and 1990s, giving McCourt the opportunity to watch, or at least hear about, the Dublin trilogy and a small number of O'Casey's other works.<sup>56</sup> McCourt had the chance to witness something of an O'Casey revival in New York during the 1950s to 1970s when Paul Shyre (1926-1989), an American actor and director, wrote and produced adaptations of the O'Casey autobiographies, and successfully staged plays such as the 1956-7 production of *Purple Dust* at New York's Cherry Lane Theatre.<sup>57</sup> McCourt claims to have been unable to afford the admission price to see Mercury Theatre's production of *The Plough and the Stars* in Limerick in June 1947 and Limerick Playhouse's *Juno and the Paycock* in July 1947.<sup>58</sup> In his email correspondence with me he says that he had to be satisfied with listening on his neighbour's radio to O'Casey, who according to McCourt, was on 'all the time [...] Before I ever read him I had absorbed *Juno* and *The Shadow of a Gunman*, and to a lesser extent, *The Plough*.<sup>59</sup> McCourt reiterates this point in *Angela's Ashes* by recollecting 'sit[ting] outside on the pavement under Mrs Purcell's window listening to plays on the BBC and Radio Eireann, the Irish station. You

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<sup>55</sup> 'Tis, pp. 154–155. \* It is likely that McCourt is referring to Nora Clitheroe's baby.

<sup>56</sup> O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, ran from 9 to 21 March 1959 at the Golden Gate Theatre, see Internet Broadway Database <<http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=4511>> [accessed 28 January 2009].

O'Casey, *The Shadow Of A Gunman*, ran from 19 November 1958 to 3 January 1959 at the Bijou Theatre, see Internet Broadway Database <<http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=2716>> [accessed 28 January 2009].

O'Casey, *The Plough and the Stars*, ran from 4 January to 10 February 1973 at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre, Internet Broadway Database <<http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=3162>> [accessed 28 January 2009].

Irish Repertory Company, New York, productions of *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*, <<http://www.irishrep.org/history.htm>> [accessed 29 January 2009].

O'Casey, *Pictures In The Hallway*, ran from 16 September to 4 November 1956 at the Playhouse Theatre. See Internet Broadway Database <<http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=2562>> [accessed 28 January 2009].

O'Casey, *I Knock At The Door*, ran from 29 September to 10 November 1959 at the Belasco Theatre. See Internet Broadway Database <<http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=2640>> [accessed 28 January 2009].

O'Casey, *Red Roses For Me*, ran from 28 December 1955 to 21 January 1956 at the Booth Theatre. See Internet Broadway Database <<http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=2393>> [accessed 28 January 2009].

<sup>57</sup> See, 'Sean O'Casey, Irish Playwright, is Dead at 84', in *The New York Times*, 19 September 1964 <<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0330.html>> [accessed 24 September 2010].

Also see the Cherry Lane Theatre's production of Paul Shyre's *Purple Dust* <<http://www.cherrylanetheatre.org/history/past/purple-dust/>> [accessed 20 May 2012].

<sup>58</sup> See *Limerick Leader*, 16 June 1947, p. 1, cc. 1-2 and 5 July 1947, p. 1, cc. 1-2.

<sup>59</sup> McCourt confirmed this in a personal email, 20 January 2009.

can hear plays by O'Casey' (p.318). Anthony Cronin contends that in the 1940s, evening radio for 'serious listeners' was a source of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure, and that the ultimate effect was an altogether 'richer and more poetic' juxtapositioning of words that produced an effect on the imagination that was peculiar to radio alone.<sup>60</sup> Although this had been achieved in theatre before realistic settings and 'trappings' prevailed, McCourt claims to have absorbed O'Casey's drama aurally long before he experienced his work in printed form or through visual performance. The frequency with which McCourt describes listening to radio drama in the 1930s and 1940s (even hearing O'Casey himself perform the introduction to the 1955 broadcast of *Juno and the Paycock*), suggests that in his writings McCourt might be replicating a form of Dublin speech from O'Casey that he had not actually heard in real life.<sup>61</sup> As an avid radio listener, McCourt may also have heard broadcasts of O'Casey's plays on the BBC World Service.<sup>62</sup>

As Brooks observes, melodrama is a 'certain fictional system for making sense of experience, as a semantic field of force.'<sup>63</sup> Thus, while the memoir form is McCourt's attempt to explain himself to himself as well as to his wide audience, with its highly emotive narrative and rhetoric, *Angela's Ashes* — and *'Tis* to a certain extent — fall into the category that Laura Mulvey defines as the 'male melodrama'. She points to the distinction in the narrative strategy between melodramas with a male protagonist, which tend to result in the resolution of 'irreconcilable social and sexual dilemmas', particularly as McCourt's denouement suggests the reconciliation of the past through

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<sup>60</sup> Anthony Cronin, 'Many a Long Night: The Box with the Lighted Dial', in *Written on the Wind: Personal Memories of Irish Radio 1926-76*, ed. by Louis McRedmond (Radio Telefís Éireann in association with Gill and Macmillan, 1976), 61-71 (p. 66).

<sup>61</sup> The BBC production of *Juno and the Paycock*, June 1955, stored on Microfilm of the *BBC Radio Drama Catalogue 1923-1975*, held at the British Library <<http://www.bl.uk/soundarchive>> [accessed 31 January 2009]. Juno was played by Siobhan McKenna, Mary Boyle was played by Maureen Cusack, Cyril Cusack was cast as Joxer and Milo O'Shea as Jerry Devine.

<sup>62</sup> For example, the June 1946 production of *The Plough and the Stars*, and the Radio Éireann Players live broadcast of *The Plough* in September 1949 may have been the last O'Casey play that McCourt heard from Limerick. Information about the broadcast of 16 June 1946 obtained from Anyamountofbooks.com. which holds the typescript of the broadcast of *The Plough and the Stars*, adapted by Alex MacDonald, together with *Radio Times* press cuttings. Ref RTE RTEMC 164 [accessed 29 January 2009].

<sup>63</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. xiii.

the pursuit of dreams.<sup>64</sup> In echoing O'Casey's Dublin slum tenement setting, McCourt's structure is shaped by his New York slum tenement infancy, followed by what he depicts as the relentlessly miserable conditions of Limerick poverty and impotent fathering.<sup>65</sup> As we saw in Chapter 2, McCourt re-presents his experience using themes that build a graphic account of, for example, the religious prejudice and rigid class assumptions that are levelled at his father. In the same way, misguided judgement and enforced ignorance are juxtaposed with spiteful family sentiment wherein the moral reason for McCourt's family hardship is attributed to his mother having brought all her 'trouble' upon herself for having married a Northerner with the 'odd manner' and a 'streak of Presbyterian in him right enough' (p.10).<sup>66</sup>

This comic articulation of the ridiculous stereotype illustrates succinctly how the political message is consistently defanged or obfuscated in McCourt's writing. As we saw in Chapter 2, real political characters like Oliver Cromwell are historically distanced and political songs are taken out of context in order for McCourt to make a point about religious prejudice, drunken patriarchy and ineffectual parenting. McCourt recalls a particular scene: 'Dad is out looking a job again and sometimes he comes home with the smell of whiskey, singing songs about suffering Ireland. Mam gets angry and says Ireland can kiss her arse' (p.15). While this statement is potentially insulting to nationalists McCourt defangs the sting by inserting the comic Irishism 'kiss her arse' to temper the latent affront while mimicking Boucicault's use of Miles-na-Coppaleen in *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), Shaun the Post in *Arrah-Na-Pogue* (1864) and Conn, the Shaughraun in *The Shaughraun* (1874) to stage nationalism in an inoffensive manner. Even though *The Shaughraun* is concerned with the Fenian uprising, the politics are diluted by Boucicault's deployment of comic roguery, villains, daring escapes, double

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<sup>64</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama', in *Movie*, 25 (Winter, 1977/1978), 53-56 (p. 56).

<sup>65</sup> See Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, pp. 234-23. Cleary observes that O'Casey's setting is usually a 'working-class tenement, the social situation one of political turmoil and rebellion, and the theatrical conventions [...] are considerable indebted to nineteenth-century melodrama.'

<sup>66</sup> These forces of bigotry entrench the systematic conditions of poverty in ways that McCourt's family find impossible to overcome; the irony being that McCourt's father was a Catholic.



crosses, love at first sight, damsels in distress, and other elements essential to his interpretation of melodrama.

Similarly, through the character that McCourt gives to his father, McCourt's own political engagement is understated in contrast to O'Casey's realistic depiction of the Easter Rising in *The Plough and the Stars* in which shops are looted, and the revolutionary flag is seen in a pub. An Irish woman being portrayed as a prostitute was so unacceptable to some Irish nationalists that they mounted a riposte by singing the national anthem from the theatre's balcony. In contrast, Irish audiences might be mollified by O'Casey's sympathetic depiction of the maternal image of which we are reminded in McCourt's writing. O'Connor has described O'Casey's portrayal as 'hymns of praise to women' yet 'above all to his dead mother.'<sup>67</sup> McCourt follows O'Casey in presenting women who exhibit endurance and courage in the face of suffering and adversity to embody Brooks's contention that melodrama privileges the maternal; a figure that Brooks names 'virtue persecuted', while embodying the notion of the Manichean conflict in which the milieu is divided into good and evil, weak and strong, oppressed and oppressors.<sup>68</sup>

### **The Maternal Figure**

O'Casey's representation of gendered politics illustrates how female characters suffer and endure while men indulge in either futile or fatal bluster and rhetoric that is mirrored in McCourt's father's egregious sins against the family. Juno and Mary Boyle are typical of O'Casey's figures of pathos who encourage criticism of the indolence, faint-heartedness and empty heroics of the male characters, exemplified in Juno's declaration: 'Oh what can God do agen' the stupidity o'men?'<sup>69</sup> Emotional excess is also seen in Nora Clitheroe's performance in Act III of *The Plough* before her descent into

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<sup>67</sup> O'Connor, *The Backward Look: A Survey of Irish Literature*, pp. 218-219.

<sup>68</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, pp. 56-56.

<sup>69</sup> O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, Act III, p. 252.

madness. By the end of *The Plough* and *Juno*, these women are bereaved and abandoned or, in Nora's case, dead.

McCourt transposes O'Casey's 'tragic' women (Minnie, Juno, Nora and Bessie), and perhaps O'Casey's own mother, into the figure of 'the defeated mother moaning by the fire' in *Angela's Ashes* (p.1). Indeed, Gene believes that the 'heroic' figure of Juno is related to O'Casey's mother, as made manifest in O'Casey's *Autobiographies*.<sup>70</sup> McCourt establishes how the centrality of the subjugated maternal figure is essential to the aesthetic of male 'excess', while exposing the agents of oppression that Linda Williams argues are key to the 'emotional and moral truth' within melodrama.<sup>71</sup> McCourt emphasises the theme of entrapment through the construction of his mother's character, giving equal attention to how she exhibits the psychological state of the lonely self, caused by his father's inadequacy as a provider and his eventual abandonment. McCourt portrays his mother as a woman who craves domestic respectability but who is constrained and imprisoned, thus personifying Brooks's argument that while the melodramatic heroine is literally or figuratively mute she, nonetheless, expresses inner conflict and emotion through 'inarticulate cry and gesture'.<sup>72</sup> This point is illustrated when McCourt recalls his mother remonstrating with his father: 'These children are hungry [...] You mad oul' bastard, did you drink all the money again?' Yet, Angela McCourt is silenced by her husband's drunken demand that she show 'reshpeck' in front of the children (p.81). While the suggestion that suffering as a form of empowerment may appear ironic, there is a complex negotiation between pathos and reflection within this portrayal.

In *'Tis* McCourt quotes from *Juno and the Paycock* to stress the point that his mother deals with misfortune by having 'a nice cup of tea', which he says reminds him of

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<sup>70</sup> Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>71</sup> Linda Williams, 'Melodrama Revisited', in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. by Nick Browne (University of California Press, 1998), 42-88 (p. 42). Williams proposes a new definition of melodrama as a mode 'that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action'

<sup>72</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, pp. 56, 67, 40, 48.

'Captain Boyle yelling at Juno [...] Tay, tay, tay, if a man was dyin', you'd be tryin' to make him swally a cup o' tay', even though it is Johnny Boyle who utters these words at the beginning of Act 1.<sup>73</sup> In *Angela's Ashes*, meanwhile, McCourt implies that his mother sees life in terms of basic human needs rather than his father's empty patriotic rhetoric: 'Food on the table is what she wants, not suffering Ireland' (p.15). Hence, the theme of poverty and hardship is pervasive, and while the family is sustained by the charitable St Vincent de Paul Society and the Dispensary (an elementary system of public assistance), McCourt imparts that neither organisation succeeds in alleviating the family's misery.<sup>74</sup> When the McCourts first settle in Limerick, McCourt's father's 'dole money' is a meagre nineteen shillings a week, for a family of six: 'Just enough for all of us to starve on', says Angela (p.63).<sup>75</sup> McCourt knows that he is sure to evoke an emotional response from his audience by mirroring O'Casey's emphasis on themes of poverty and death in *Juno*. While Angela McCourt's losses ensure that the narrative meets Elsaesser's category of 'family melodrama', both writers make a larger statement about the nature of such an existence while showing the wider implications of poverty.<sup>76</sup> For example, while Boyle's persistent unemployment is initially amusing, O'Casey is commenting that severe paucity can extend to issues of life and death.

McCourt's knowledge of O'Casey's writing has shaped his consciousness about the melodramatic possibilities that stem from the disintegration of the family and the ravaging effects of disease and malnutrition. Similarly, McCourt is aware that part of O'Casey's attraction stems from his tragic-comic tales of families and communities destroyed by political violence enhanced by language steeped in comic exaggeration and vivid characterisation. He mirrors the way that O'Casey's multiple tonal register shifts from comedy to tragedy, and from melodrama to vaudeville, to highlight the

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<sup>73</sup> *'Tis*, p. 110.

O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, Act I, p. 207.

<sup>74</sup> McCourt donated part of the royalties from *Angela and the Baby Jesus* to the St Vincent de Paul Society. See Stephanie Merritt, 'A Heart warming tale rises from the ashes', in *The Guardian*, 11 November 2007 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/nov/11/fiction.features4>> [accessed 9 February 2010].

McCourt, *Angela and the Baby Jesus* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

<sup>75</sup> In *Angela's Ashes* McCourt provides a vivid picture of the profound abuse of power by these 'Institutions'.

<sup>76</sup> Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', pp. 43-69.

reality of the anguish and dissonance behind the lives of his characters. For example, Juno's struggle to support her family is tempered by the hilarity aroused by the boasting and bluster of her feckless husband, whose alcohol-ravaged brain and 'injured' body function as a vehicle for spinning tales about a mythical past, and his idleness and absurd philosophy is threatened when he is tempted by the bourgeois illusion of wealth.<sup>77</sup> For Angela McCourt, however, there is no promise of the new life that Juno envisages for herself, her daughter and her unborn grandchild when she says: 'It'll have what's far bettther — it'll have two mothers.'<sup>78</sup>

By contrast, McCourt's focus on *single* parenthood in *Angela's Ashes* is juxtaposed with themes of disease and poverty in the episode where the consumptive Denis Clohessy expresses his disappointment that the young Frankie is unable to emulate his mother's dancing talent. Angela's reply that 'tis hard to dance with one shoe' stands as a metaphor for the scarcity of essential equipage. McCourt recollects how his mother is forced to beg, and as the sole provider, becomes the 'one shoe' after McCourt's father leaves, ostensibly to work in England (pp.252,288). Although McCourt's mother is a silent accomplice to his father's failure (the melodramatic 'mute'), she embodies the most tragic aspect of poverty in Ireland in the 1930s. Her aim is to simply survive, albeit the incessant rain stands as an inverted symbol of evaporating resistance. In the face of this, McCourt weaves his memoir with a melodramatic foreshadowing of the failure of his own father and others when he outlines Limerick's miserable conditions:

In pubs, steam rose from damp bodies and garments to be inhaled with cigarette and pipe smoke laced with the stale fumes of spilled stout and whiskey and tinged with the odor of piss wafting in from the outdoor jakes here many a man puked up his week's wages (p.2).

McCourt shows that melodramatic elements still flourish by providing a naturalist representation of Limerick working-class life that echoes O'Casey's portrait of Dublin

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<sup>77</sup> See Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, p. 219. Kiberd notes O'Casey's stock melodramatic device of a legacy that turns out to be false, arguing that he uses this as a 'sarcastic metaphor for what he derided as the fake inheritance of Irish Republicanism', when viewed against the background of an insidious civil war.

<sup>78</sup> O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, Act III, p. 253.

tenement existence. Home and harmonious family lives are absent and the image of the deprivation that is exacerbated by 'puked up' wages has resolute theatrical overtones of physical and emotional hardship. Although O'Casey's dramatisation has evolved from melodrama's original simplicity wherein poverty is equated with virtue and wealth with villainy, Grene has said of Juno and Boyle: 'The Captain stands for drink, talk, the public house, the pleasure principle; Juno stands for work, home, the family; the reality principle.'<sup>79</sup> There are echoes here of the attributes that Boucicault gives to his character Conn in *The Shaughraun* when Mrs O'Kelly laments to Moya that the 'shebeen' has been her son's home: 'Conn nivir di an honest day's work in his life — but dhrinkin', an' fishin', an shootin', an' asportin', and love-makin'.<sup>80</sup> O'Casey has the indolent and irresponsible Boyle frequent Foley's and Ryan's just as McCourt's father can be found mainly in South's but in most other public houses in Limerick City. McCourt recalls that 'the barman at South's remembers my father, how he spent his wages and his dole while singing patriotic songs and making speeches from the dock like a condemned rebel' (p.397). Nonetheless, McCourt's need for his father is central to his identity even though his father 'drinks the dole [money]' and his pride jeopardises the family's survival. McCourt could have given his father the character of the melodramatic villain with the stereotypical stoic spouse. Instead, we have already heard McCourt's bemused view of his father being like the 'Holy Trinity'.

The young Frankie McCourt remains loyal yet learns that men do not beg but go the pubs to drink 'the pint'. His response to his mother's survival strategies is equally contradictory. In *Angela's Ashes* the reader suspects that Angela's 'excitement' with Laman Griffin is a means of paying for their board and lodging. McCourt casts Griffin as the melodramatic stage scoundrel since he takes advantage of the family's vulnerability and uses the young Frank as an errand boy and Angela as a servant and sex slave, causing a life-long emotional estrangement between McCourt and his mother (p.340).<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama*, p. 129.

<sup>80</sup> Boucicault, *The Shaughraun*, Act I, p. 187.

<sup>81</sup> Because of her 'fall from grace' Angela is more complex than the Melodramatic matriarch.

This episode illustrates succinctly how McCourt follows O'Casey in privileging the heroine's centrality to melodrama, positioning her as 'virtue persecuted' yet in a clear association with both religious and nationalistic iconography, about which Edna O'Brien has commented: 'Ireland has always been a woman, a womb [...] a Rosaleen [...] a bride, a harlot.'<sup>82</sup> Indeed, McCourt's sexual encounter with Theresa Carmody and O'Casey's presentation of Mary Boyle's pregnancy, highlight the virgin/whore dichotomy in which women who do not adhere to a saintly standard of moral purity are viewed as 'doomed' (p.386).

O'Casey's themes of loss and female hysteria are enhanced when Jack's heroic death in action is announced to Nora after she has lost her reason. While Bessie's death is the only one actually witnessed on stage in *The Plough*, it is likely that O'Casey produces pleasurable 'tears' from his audience when Nora's baby shares a coffin with Mollser, the disturbing presence of death bringing about a profound change in audience mood.<sup>83</sup> McCourt's recollections of the respective deaths of his twin brothers, Oliver and Eugene, emulate the pathos that McCourt is familiar with from O'Casey's writing. The echo is also evident in McCourt's father's pitiable reaction to Eugene's death, providing some insight into one of the reasons that he sought solace in alcohol:

Dear God above, I don't know why children have to die [...] You told the river to kill and the Shannon killed. Could you at last be merciful? Could you leave us the children we have? [....] Amen (p.90).

As a mode of sensibility, melodramatic elements represent the unrepresentable, illustrated by McCourt recalling his fear of the 'two black pints on Eugene's white coffin', and the choice of a single poignant sentence to report Eugene's death after fretting for his twin: 'He died anyway' (pp.87,92). Echoes of Nora Clitheroe's tragedy are summoned in McCourt's mother's pathetic reaction to the death of his twenty-one

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<sup>82</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 27.

Edna O'Brien, *Mother Ireland* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 11.

<sup>83</sup> O'Casey, *The Plough and the Stars*, Act IV, pp. 80, 84, 96.

See Stephen Neale, 'Melodrama and Tears', in *Screen*, 27, 6, (1986), pp. 9-22. Neale argues that melodrama has the ability to move audiences and induce physical reactions like crying. We cry to satisfy the demand for our own infantile fantasy and the demand for sustained fulfilment that weeping can bring.

day old sister, Margaret, in New York. McCourt's performance on the audio recording of *Angela's Ashes* captures her anguish more vividly than the written text: 'Dad eases the baby from her arms. The doctor wraps Margaret completely in a blanket and my mother cries Oh Jesus, you'll smother her [...]' (pp.31,33). For both Nora Clitheroe and Angela McCourt the body becomes the place for the inscription of a highly emotional message that cannot be verbalised.

McCourt's depiction of illness relates to the nineteenth-century stage where the dying child functioned as a reliable trigger of intense emotions. Similarly, the child invalid dramatises social injustices, serving as an indictment of the debilitating Limerick slums. In the Ireland of 1906, nearly 76% of deaths were due to tuberculosis, or 'consumption' as it was known, and in Limerick in particular, there was a historic prevalence of the affliction that remained high until the 1950s.<sup>84</sup> Census data records suggest that contributory factors were both over-crowding and deprivation:

In the free state as a whole the typical habitation [...] is three rooms; the typical family (14.8%) is five persons, but 51% of the families consist of six or more persons each. In Limerick the typical habitation is two rooms.<sup>85</sup>

The histrionic content of *Angela's Ashes* is augmented by McCourt's grim portrait of the cold, damp, over-crowded and unhealthy living conditions under which contagious fevers were incubated and fostered inadvertently.<sup>86</sup> His own sojourn in hospital with typhoid fever where he encounters, but is not allowed to meet, Patricia Madigan, her subsequent death from diphtheria, alongside the consumption that takes Theresa Carmody's life, all draw on the stage performance of O'Casey's dying child, Mollser. Similarly, McCourt's recollection of his mother's bout of pneumonia as a consequence of economic hardship and dire living conditions re-imagines the melodramatic performance of the stage invalid (pp.218,223,276). While he undertakes a cultural

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<sup>84</sup>James Kelly, 'Infanticide in Eighteenth Century Ireland', in *Irish Economic and Social History*, Vol. 19, (1992), 5-26, (p. 5).

<sup>85</sup>Data taken from Irish Free State, *Census of Population, 1926*, Vol. IV, 'Housing Conditions', obtained from Limerick City Library [accessed 13 May 2010].

<sup>86</sup>*Angela's Ashes*, p. 99. The McCourts were susceptible to the disease spread by the human waste thrown daily into the adjacent shared toilet by the neighbouring households.

representation of tuberculosis, McCourt juxtaposes Theresa Carmody's death with desire and sexual passion. In the nineteenth century, tuberculosis was shrouded in erotic undertones, primarily because female patients acquired a flush and pallor that could be associated with sexual arousal, providing a further dimension for McCourt for whom loss of virginity is linked to death. However, as the ardent lover, McCourt does not recoil from the risk of infection. His emotive account of Theresa's death illustrates the sensational poignant climax with his self-blame, exemplifying what Vivian Mercier has identified as the macabre, the grotesque, the tragicomic within Irish literature, since these themes help the reader to 'accept death and to belittle life.'<sup>87</sup> Theresa's death symbolises the doomed Irish society from which McCourt feels he must escape. The Shannon, named by McCourt's father as 'a river that kills', is connected with the harbinger of death and disease, rather than being seen as the Baptismal symbol of life (p.238). Hence, Limerick becomes a metaphorical Purgatory, whose stasis and introversion provide the very antithesis of McCourt's 'America'. The idea of seeking salvation in the 'American Dream' grows more pressing.

Nonetheless, *Angela's Ashes* echoes the traditional melodramatic denouement that is seen in Boucicault's plays that bow to melodramatic convention by imposing the happy ending that both the audience and the genre require; the pardon of the wronged hero and the triumph of good over evil. Moreover, this is a succinct example of the political comment in Boucicault and McCourt's writing being defanged since the happy resolution and the punishment of 'bad' people leaves very little liberty for us to critique the politics of the situations that are described, even though both writers solicit an affective identification on the part of the spectator/reader to negotiate a specific historical and cultural struggle, conflict, or anxiety. *Angela's Ashes* ends on a note of hope for McCourt when he returns to New York in October 1949. Indeed, O'Casey remarked ten years later that one of the great tragedies of Irish emigration was that

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<sup>87</sup> Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 49.



the young and vigorous were leaving.<sup>88</sup> In Boucicault's nineteenth-century melodrama, *The Shaughraun*, the marriage of an Irish rebel's daughter with a British redcoat does not provide the audience with a scenario in which to critique colonialism, any more than McCourt's critique of poverty, with its optimistic denouement, allows his audience space to consider the many parts of the world today that, because of the machinations of international capitalism, see people suffering from the same illnesses, poverty and deprivation. By way of contrast, to the aforementioned histrionic scenes we must look at how McCourt has been influenced by the way in which Boucicault and O'Casey temper sorrow with hilarity.

### **Language and Excess**

The self-referential nature of melodrama is a key mode of communication, brought about by the conventions of over-determined characterisation, acting and staging. These deliberately constructed sign systems exploit the playfulness and artfulness of melodrama. Boucicault's 'Irish' plays are marked strongly by this meta-theatrical awareness, and the exaggerated performances of his characters are manipulated in O'Casey's hands into the comic asides and vaudeville-like exchanges of Boyle and Joxer whose flamboyant language and diction is heightened in comparison to standard English. Here we see a personification of Merriman's aforesaid 'gross caricatures' of 'Irishness', whose very appeal, nonetheless, derives from their ludicrous utterances.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, Raymond Williams notes that O'Casey's verbal ostentation emits the sound of 'confusion and disintegration', discernable in Boyle's habit of using a succession of rhetorical questions, expanding the sentences so that the phrasing builds into a vivid image such as when he derides Jerry Devine for betraying to Juno that he was in the pub, though he swore to the contrary:

BOYLE: What business is it o' yours whether I wan in a snug or no?  
What do you want to be gallopin' about afther me for? Is a man not to

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<sup>88</sup> See, 'O'Casey did not celebrate his 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday', in *Irish Times*, 31 March 1960, p. 9.

<sup>89</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, p. 196.

be allowed to leave his house for a minute without havin' a pack o' spies, pimps, an' informers cantherin' at his heels?<sup>90</sup>

McCourt himself, who has defined O'Casey's autobiographical writing as 'ostentatious, annoyingly ornate and florid', has unwittingly acknowledged Williams's point about O'Casey's stylistic affectation.<sup>91</sup> McCourt is proposing that O'Casey's dramatic texts are more accessible to the reader and more appealing because of their less idiosyncratic approach. Roy Pascal's opinion helps to clarify why O'Casey's autobiographical writing has shaped McCourt's response. Pascal believes that because O'Casey writes in the third person the results are 'disturbing', primarily because O'Casey posits an objective relationship to himself, thereby misrepresenting 'the true character of life as seen from inside.'<sup>92</sup> O'Casey's audience would be aware that in Irish political discourse no term is more abusive than 'informer'. McCourt certainly knows this from his school days when Mr Benson 'goes into a rage' if his pupils forget an Irish word: 'Irish is fine for patriots. English for traitors and informers' (p.130). Elizabeth Butler Cullingford notes that the 1798 rising is a popular historical setting, particularly as its failure was due, in part, to Irish informers, so that the melodramatic villain became a desirable role to both play and because it met the audience's 'horizon of expectation.'<sup>93</sup> However, 'the villain' is one of the characteristics that led to pejorative descriptions of melodrama with further criticism being directed towards highly stylized narrative technique and grand gestures that are deemed artificial, excessively emotional and anachronistic. With some justification, melodrama is often seen as anything but subtle, a form of theatre that lacks nuanced plotting and finely shaded poignant detail. Such a viewpoint tends to see

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<sup>90</sup> Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 151.

O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, Act I, p. 212.

<sup>91</sup> McCourt, After Dinner Speech at The American Conference for Irish Studies. However, McCourt has uttered variations of this quote at other forums; Frank McCourt *et al*, audio recording of The Key West Literary Seminar on *The Memoir*, Disc 13b, 'Preserving Our History Through Story', January 13 – 16, 2000, Here McCourt says: '[I find] O'Casey's writing 'poetic and flambuoyant. I can hardly read it. It annoys me.' Also see Dave Welch, Interview with Frank McCourt for Powells.com. *Staying After School with Frank McCourt* <<http://www.powells.com/blog/original-essays/staying-after-school-with-frank-mccourt-by-dave/>> [accessed 12 February 2008]; 'I don't care much for [O'Casey's] writing anymore— it's very florid and ornate and poetic and so forth — but it gives you the story of his life.'

<sup>92</sup> Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, p. 165.

<sup>93</sup> Cullingford, 'National Identities in Performance', p. 289.

melodrama as formulaic, sentimental, old-fashioned and, therefore, inferior to the 'serious' drama of Yeats's vision.

A further incident in *Angela's Ashes* not only exemplifies McCourt's process of vivid image-making but also abounds with features of 'Irish' humour that echo those heard on the stage. McCourt's depiction of his grandmother as a sanctimonious bigot is one of the most amusing incidents in this first memoir. The aforementioned scene in which the young Frank vomits up his 'First Communion' breakfast in his grandmother's backyard develops into one of pure farce when she sends Frank to question the priest about what to do with 'God' in her backyard:

[...] Bless me Father, for I have sinned, it's a minute since my last confession.  
A minute! Are you the boy that was just here?  
I am Father.  
What is it now?  
My grandma says, Holy water or ordinary water? [To wash God away].  
Ordinary water, and tell your grandmother not to be bothering me again.  
I told her, Ordinary water, Grandma, and he said don't be bothering him again.  
Don't be bothering him again. That bloody ignorant bog-trotter (p.144).

Ironically, by calling the priest an 'ignorant bog-trotter', McCourt's grandmother is repeating the type of insults that were often projected towards the Irish, exemplified by the previously mentioned American political cartoonist, Thomas Nast.<sup>94</sup> McCourt demonstrates an awareness of using language for revelation. In particular, he knows that combining dialogue with the distinctive manner in which a person speaks is an effective means of 'creating a character' such as the eccentric speech patterns of his grandmother and Uncle Pa Keating or his father's North of Ireland accent. McCourt also utilises dialogue to reveal relevant details about other characters. For example, when McCourt recalls how his Aunt Aggie insults his younger self, she also divulges details about his father: 'She tells the shop woman, Just like his father, the same odd manner, the same oul' northern jaw' (p.92).

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<sup>94</sup> See L. Perry Jr., *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*. Also see Richard Jensen, "No Irish Need Apply": A Myth of Victimization', in *Journal of Social History*, 36.2 (2002), 405-429.

McCourt also borrows O'Casey's dramatic device of deriving comedy from repetition. For example, in a clear re-imagining of O'Casey's language, both McCourt's mother and grandmother mimic Fluther Good's declaration that something is 'going beyond the beyonds.'<sup>95</sup> But while McCourt is ostensibly mirroring O'Casey, there is also an affinity with nineteenth-century drama, because O'Casey is actually paying homage to Boucicault through the liberal use of malapropisms and puns that appear in the mouths of characters such as Boyle. Both Boucicault and O'Casey draw on vibrant comedy that leads to catastrophe, providing a form of Irish melodrama that is in turn recycled by McCourt to demonstrate how melodrama has the ability to produce laughter that counteracts the tears.

### **McCourt's Exits and Entrances**

Chapter 2 highlighted how in 1997 McCourt's musical play *The Irish and How They Got That Way* rooted him in an American theatrical space. The Irish Repertory Theatre revived it during their 2010 season to mark the first anniversary of McCourt's death.<sup>96</sup> Further evidence of just how influenced by the playhouse McCourt's writing had become by the mid-1990s can be found in the fact that he spent time on the advisory board to the Irish Repertory Theatre, which has a remit to promote the work of Irish dramatists, with O'Casey and Boucicault being foremost among them.<sup>97</sup> In fact, according to one Board member, during McCourt's time on the Board, the Irish Repertory Theatre planned to 'do O'Casey' every season.<sup>98</sup> As I stated in the introductory chapter, McCourt undertook his own dramatic script in the form of an

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<sup>95</sup> O'Casey, *The Plough and the Stars*, Act I, p. 7.  
*Angela's Ashes*, pp. 107, 210.

<sup>96</sup> *The Irish And How They Got That Way*, revival by Charlotte Moore at the Irish Repertory Theatre, 14 July–26 September 2010 <<http://www.irishrep.org/irishandhowtheygotthatway.html>> [accessed 1 February 2011]. Also see Farrar, Jennifer, The New York Irish Repertory Theatre's revival of Frank McCourt's *The Irish And How They Got That Way*, in *The Record*, 1 August 2010 <[PRESShttp://www.northjersey.com/arts\\_entertainment/theater/99709084\\_The\\_Irish\\_as\\_Frank\\_McCourt\\_knew\\_them.html](http://www.northjersey.com/arts_entertainment/theater/99709084_The_Irish_as_Frank_McCourt_knew_them.html)> [accessed 1 February 2011].

<sup>97</sup> See <<http://www.irishrep.org/staff.htm>> [accessed 9 February 2009].

<sup>98</sup> Personal email from Charlotte Moore, Director of the Irish Repertory Theatre, New York, dated 30 January 2009.

Also see Mel Gussow, 'For Sean O'Casey, Acceptance at last as a Modern Master', in *The New York Times*, 30 October 1988, p. 7, c. 2.

autobiographical comedy review, *A Couple of Blaguards*, which he co-wrote and first performed in with his brother, Malachy, in October 1984.<sup>99</sup> This signifies that *Angela's Ashes* found its earliest enunciation in a performative genre and emphasises Sherrill Grace's insistence that 'plays can be auto/biographical'. Indeed, Chapter 1 sought to address Grace's contention that few auto/biography specialists have explored a range of auto/biographical plays or examined what actually happens to life-writing when it takes the form of a theatrical performance.<sup>100</sup> McCourt himself has referred to *A Couple of Blaguards* as a 'two-man-show' and a 'dual autobiography.'<sup>101</sup> Elsewhere he recalls:

I did a theatre act in New York with my brother Malachy about growing up in Limerick and about our adventures in America. That might have been one way of putting my boyhood into literary form. But as it turned out, it wasn't honest. It was an entertainment. I don't even like it, though we made some money out of it.<sup>102</sup>

This statement confirms that McCourt had indeed penned an autobiographical text about his childhood experiences before the publication of *Angela's Ashes*, and that *Blaguards* was a prototype that may have been long-conceived before finally reaching the New York stage. Interestingly, McCourt's comment also pre-empts criticism of *Angela's Ashes*. If McCourt was accused of using his Irish connections for commercial gain, he could, in turn point out that he was himself only re-using some of the ideas of Boucicault, against whom exactly the same accusations had been made in the late

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<sup>99</sup> *Blaguards* was produced and directed by Mike Houlihan at the Village Gate in New York before its subsequent word tour. It was twice revived by The Irish Repertory Theatre; once at the Benefit event in 1997 and again in the 1999-2000.

See <<http://www.mikehoulihan.com/about/bio.html>> and <<http://www.irishrep.org/abenefit.htm>> as well as <<http://www.irishrep.org/history.htm>> [accessed 31 January 2009].

McCourt confirmed that he performed *Blaguards* in New York, Limerick and Sligo in a personal email, 7 May 2008.

Frank McCourt and Malachy McCourt, *A Couple of Blaguards*, undated, typed play script supplied by Andrew McKinnon Presentations Pty Ltd., Australia, received 19 December 2006.

<sup>100</sup> Sherrill Grace, 'Performing the Auto/Biographical Pact: Towards A Theory of Identity in Performance', in *Tracing the Biographical*, ed. by Marlene Kadar, et al (Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2005), 65-79 (p. 66).

<sup>101</sup> Michael Silverblatt's interview with Frank McCourt for the KCRW radio programme *Bookworm*, 5 December 1996 <[www.kcrw.com/etcprograms/bw/bw961205frank\\_mccourt](http://www.kcrw.com/etcprograms/bw/bw961205frank_mccourt)> [accessed 9 February 2009].

<sup>102</sup> McCourt, 'Learning to Chill Out', in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. By William K. Zinsser (Boston: Mariner Books, 1998), 61-81 (p. 77). *Blaguards* pre-dates the publication of *Angela's Ashes* by eight years.

1800s. For many in Irish history, emigration has been a painful necessity rather than a freely made choice. The characters in *Blaguards* are some of those that appear in *Angela's Ashes*, ranging from McCourt's grandmother who spits on the young Frank's wild 'Presbyterian hair', to the priest whose hell fire rhetoric warns that sinners' eyeballs will explode in Hell. McCourt incorporates the set-piece of the wake that is familiar in Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* but with a twist on the theme of the body rising from the coffin. The comic banter between the McCourt brothers, in the guise of characters from 'the lanes', is also reminiscent of Boyle and Daly's absurd dialogue: 'A lovely wake it was for little Jack McQuiggan that died till that Michael McGuire came in lingers drunk, started singing without an invitation, dancing like a whirling dervish without a partner. The next thing – he had a heart attack and he dropped down dead. He ruined the whole wake.'<sup>103</sup> This piece of comic dialogue underscores my argument that McCourt was familiar with the work of both dramatists.

### **Boucicault's Influence on McCourt's Writing**

McCourt acknowledged his familiarity with Boucicault's 'Irish' plays, telling me: 'I've seen both *Arragh-na-Pogue* and *The Shaughraun* done in New York by the Irish Repertory Theatre. Great stuff.'<sup>104</sup> However, this is an example of how the memoirist can confuse dates and events, simply mis-remember, or employ deliberate evasion. The Irish Repertory Theatre produced *The Shaughraun* in their 1998-1999 season and *The Colleen Bawn* was included in the 2003-2004 programme.<sup>105</sup> Director, Charlotte Moore, has confirmed that they have never produced *Arragh-na-Pogue*, but if McCourt did see a revival in New York, it could have been the one produced by the Irish Classical Theatre Company in Buffalo, New York, whose credo is much like that of its

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<sup>103</sup> Frank McCourt and Malachy McCourt, *A Couple of Blaguards* (New York: Samuel French, 2011), p. 20.

<sup>104</sup> McCourt confirmed this to me in a personal email, 20 January 2009.

<sup>105</sup> Irish Repertory Theatre, season history <<http://www.irishrep.org/history.htm>> [accessed 1 February, 2009].

New York City counterpart.<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, *Angela's Ashes* would have been published at the time, although *'Tis* may still have been at the editing stage along with an early version of *Teacher Man*. Thus, whether he knew it or not, McCourt may have been influenced by a review of performances staged elsewhere; or a textual reading of Boucicault's work; or by a set of Boucicault's themes and tropes as mediated by Seán O'Casey whose work McCourt certainly did know at this stage.<sup>107</sup> Even so, McCourt would have been aware that Boucicault enjoyed considerable commercial and critical success as both a dramatist and actor, writing for his mass international audience, and shaping his characterisations and themes for the popular taste of the 'everyman'. From an aesthetic perspective, Boucicault situated his stories in contemporary settings with historically relevant themes, most memorably in his staging of *The Shaughraun* against the background of the Fenian rising and the trial of the 'Manchester martyrs'. Although realistic events both inspired and provided a backdrop for the play, this did not form the basis for a passionate political statement since, in the fabric of the play, Irish patriotism and British colonialism remain deliberately blurred so that the audience can focus instead upon the more central virtues of honour and true love that triumph over

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<sup>106</sup>According to a personal email from Charlotte Moore on 30 January 2009, the ICTC is intent upon presenting 'Irish plays of traditional merit, both traditional and contemporary' and to produce them at the 'highest level of artistic excellence' for 'national and international audiences.'  
Information about this *Arragh-na-Pogue* production obtained from The Lincoln Centre for Performing Arts, New York, 2 December 2008.

See New York Theatre Archive <[http://www.nytheatre.com/nytheatre/archweb/arch\\_006.htm](http://www.nytheatre.com/nytheatre/archweb/arch_006.htm)> [accessed 5 February 2009].

Also see Storm Theater production history, *Arragh na Pogue*, 10 January – 5 February 2000 <<http://www.stormtheatre.com/past.html#1999>> [accessed 8 June 2011].

<sup>107</sup> It is worthwhile to note the reviews of what McCourt experienced, particularly as he would have engaged with earlier discourses that express a similar sentiment. See Michael Feingold, review of *The Shaughraun*, 'Pick a Rescue', in *The Village Voice*, 24 November 1998. Feingold contends that by rearranging the values within the stereotype, Boucicault paved the way for O'Casey's 'poetic realism.'

<<http://www.villagevoice.com/1998-11-24/theater/pick-a-rescue/>> [accessed 4 May 2012].

Wilborn Hampton, 'The Plot Keeps Thickening Like a Well-Made Irish Stew', in *The New York Times*, 21 November 1998

<[http://theater.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?\\_r=1&res=9B0CEEDC1330F932A15752C1A96E958260](http://theater.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?_r=1&res=9B0CEEDC1330F932A15752C1A96E958260)> [accessed 4 May 2012]. Hampton states that Boucicault was a key contributor to the Irish Theatre tradition when 'theater at the time meant melodrama, of course.'

Feingold reviewed *The Colleen Bawn* for *The Village Voice* in October 2003; 'Eternally Green: Playwright Dion Boucicault gets his Irish up', saying: 'Steeped in Irishness, with a brogue as thick as your great-grandma's corset, *The Colleen Bawn* is nonetheless an American play, premiered in New York in 1860. Though Irish scenes and characters, largely stereotyped, had been seen on English and American stages for decades, Dion Boucicault, comic actor and melodramatist extraordinaire, was a pioneer in making plays that were genuinely of Ireland.'  
<<http://www.villagevoice.com/2003-10-21/theater/eternally-green-playwright-dion-boucicault-gets-his-irish-up/>> [accessed 1 May 2012].

the forces of corruption and dishonour, represented by Corry Kinchella and Harvey Duff.

Like Boucicault, McCourt blends Irish nationalist sentiment with a broad audience appeal. For example, the character that McCourt constructs for his father is closely related to a comic, and non-threatening character like Myles-na-Coppaleen of Boucicault's stage, whose first entrance in *The Colleen Bawn* sees him singing and carrying a keg of whiskey on his shoulders, exploiting the comic possibilities within Irish idioms like 'begorra, 'avoureen' and 'acusha.'<sup>108</sup> Boucicault's devices are echoed in *Angela's Ashes* through the comic utterances of McCourt's Uncle Pa Keating, 'Dotty' O'Neill's self-answering questions, and the self-righteous prejudice of McCourt's grandmother. Of course, in the character that McCourt affords himself there are echoes of Boucicaultian peasant hero, Shaun the Post from *Arrah-na-Pogue* when McCourt disposes of Mrs Finucane's debt ledger into the River Shannon and names himself a latter day Robin Hood (p.417). However, Boucicault's deployment of 'Irishness' through stage Irish speech acts is re-imagined most notably in McCourt's school fellow, Peter Dooley, or "Quasimodo", so called because of the hump on his back, his short, twisted right leg and red hair that 'sticks up in all directions', with 'one green eye' constantly rolling around. McCourt recalls him cursing his leg in a 'lovely English accent' which he 'got from the radio' in preparation for his aspiration to read the BBC news. However, when he is locked in the coal hole for letting his friends climb the rainspout to watch his sisters bathe, "Quasimodo" resorts to a pure Limerick accent: 'Ah, Mamma, Mamma, let me out. The rats is here. I only want to go to the BBC [...] Aw, Jasus, Mamma, Jasus. I'll never let anyone up the spout again. I'll send money from London, Mamma. Mamma!' (p.214). There is an echo of the physicality of Boucicault's informer Harvey Duff, pleading with Conn in *The Shaughraun* (1874): 'Spare me! Pity Me!'<sup>109</sup> Christopher Morash argues that spectators had the ability to discriminate between politically offensive and ideologically subversive versions of the same stage persona,

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<sup>108</sup> Boucicault, *The Colleen Bawn*, Act I, pp. 60, 62.

<sup>109</sup> Boucicault, *The Shaughraun*, Act III, p. 236.



noting the sensitivity of audiences who had 'sharp eyes for distinguishing between insulting and strategic forms of stage Irishry.'<sup>110</sup> In that regard, McCourt's exploitation of the comic possibilities within language is in the knowledge that it is commensurate with the audience's recognition and liking.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored yet another performative mode that McCourt employs for the purpose of creating a national and cultural identity of 1930s and 1940s Ireland. My analysis corroborates succinctly with Merriman's contention that writers employ themes that re-present the disillusioned and anti-Romantic merits of this era by revitalising and reworking 'reductive stereotypes of Irishness' that incriminate audiences in particular negative attitudes toward the poor, the past and Irishness.<sup>111</sup> I have clarified how McCourt revises his impoverished, traumatic childhood, amplifying the 'Irishness' in his non-playhouse-based prose writing by inserting melodramatic themes that are familiar from Boucicault and O'Casey's dramas, which I have proved are significant to readings of McCourt in terms of style and literary techniques. Furthermore, I have confirmed how the political and socio-cultural context in which McCourt writes underscores Merriman's argument that dramatic works are a way for writers to articulate that without real cultural independence, the properly postcolonial Irish state has never really arrived.<sup>112</sup>

With regard to Boucicault, I have affirmed that one of the principal factors for his success with an international audience was the portrayal of a stage Irishman who could be reasonably contentious, that is, heroic enough for nationalists but unthreatening enough for the rest of his audience. Furthermore, while Boucicault's villains are not pursuing a political agenda, the politics of reconciliation within his 'Irish' plays ensured their widespread acceptance for his own audiences. The chapter has explicated how

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<sup>110</sup> Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre 1601-2000*, p. 159.

<sup>111</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, pp. 209, 196.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4

McCourt's innovative way of selling his story to an international audience mirrors Boucicault in exploiting the sentimentality that is characteristic of melodrama in the knowledge that audiences respond with emotional, rather than intellectual answers. I have established that one of the reasons that McCourt's writing has a widespread appeal is because he emulates Boucicault in using themes familiar to the theatre, situating his audience within a milieu in which the visual and audible signs of melodrama create a moral and aesthetic continuum whereby the status of 'Irishness' is elevated. Krause has argued: 'Modern Irish drama reached its full glory with the early Abbey Theatre, but it began with Dion Boucicault [...] To give full credit to the Abbey, the influence of Boucicault alone could not have produced a Synge or an O'Casey; but it is open to doubt whether they would have created their magnificent "playboys" and "paycocks" in the manner that they did if they had not developed an early enthusiasm for Boucicault's comic-rogue heroes.'<sup>113</sup>

McCourt's intimate knowledge of dramatic conventions is reflected in his use of scenes and sub-plots that enhance the mood of his episodic writing, which I have argued is formed by his reshaping melodramatic themes that are familiar from the work of Boucicault and O'Casey. Moreover, the publication of *Angela's Ashes* coincided with a surge of interest in 'Irishness', just as in Boucicault's day when his 'Irish' plays were performed in the United States. As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, McCourt's global success was amplified precisely because the economic boom in Ireland eased the potential for him to sell a tale of Irish poverty. Hence, by reviving his version of the past at a time of improved global popularity of 'Irishness', McCourt endorses that 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland's re-branding is antithetical to the Ireland that is associated with the time of production and publication of *Angela's Ashes*. McCourt bolsters the plot of this first memoir by keeping the idea of 'the American Dream' at the forefront, and in the same way that playwrights hold their audiences by arousing expectations, McCourt ends *Angela's Ashes* with his arrival in New York. This dénouement balances the

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<sup>113</sup> Krause, ed., 'The Theater of Dion Boucicault: A Short View Of His Life and Art', p. 9.

opening sentence in which he states: 'My mother and father should have stayed in New York', while counteracting his statement in *'Tis* that there is 'no happily ever after in Seán O'Casey.'<sup>114</sup> Boucicault and O'Casey's 'Irish' plays continue to be revived in New York at the Irish Repertory Theatre, and McCourt's knowledge of their recognisable melodramatic themes has become a central defining feature for him in the telling of a writing life that has been marked and shaped by these literary forebears.

In the next chapter I call upon the work of another renowned Irish literary forefather to make the case that by utilising performance McCourt is able to emulate elements of writing and corresponding themes that had been offered previously by James Joyce. Part of Ireland's transformation in the 1990s was a new found cultural identity that allowed Joyce's profile to be manipulated by the tourist industry. Therefore, I examine McCourt's role as an international literary celebrity and global entertainer in the 1990s, showing the way that re-performances of Joyce became central to McCourt's own public identity.

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<sup>114</sup> *Angela's Ashes*, p. 1.  
*'Tis*, pp. 154 -155.

## Chapter 5

### Frank McCourt's Performance of 'Irishness': The Anxiety of James Joyce's Influence?

*'The best disguise of all is to be exactly what you say you are. Nobody believes that.'*<sup>1</sup>

This chapter broadens out beyond the four walls of the playhouse to examine how Frank McCourt may be relying on a set of paradigms from Ireland's best-known writer, James Joyce. I analyse McCourt's use of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to provide evidence of how he utilises this novel to frame his own reflexive self-consciousness and struggle for self-expression.<sup>2</sup> I make the case that this is not simply a question of McCourt emulating Joyce's own writings – which of course he does – but also a question of how McCourt navigates a set of expectations about how a post-Joycean Irish writer ought to perform. I argue that Joyce has not only influenced McCourt's texts but also provided a kind of dramatic script for the way that McCourt performed something akin to the Joycean at some of his many public speaking events. Consequently, I examine McCourt's role as an international literary celebrity and global entertainer in the 1990s, scrutinising the way that re-performances of Joyce became an acting role for McCourt, in the sense of being a performed form of identity. I assess how adept McCourt was at fashioning his image at public forums for increased effect. This constructed persona became central to McCourt's own public identity, particularly when confronted with academic and journalistic criticism that associated him frequently with Joyce.

McCourt's appropriation of Joycean stylistics attests to how he has been colonised by Joyce to the extent that he is unable to progress beyond the 'anxiety' of Joyce's aesthetic strategy.<sup>3</sup> I point to the way that Joyce has been commodified and mobilised by the late twentieth-century tourist industry to the extent that McCourt was often

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Bennett, *The Old Country* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), Act II, pp. 62-63.

<sup>2</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1996 [1916]). Hereafter cited as *A Portrait*.

<sup>3</sup> See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Bloom writes about poetry, yet his basic principle of anxiety can be applied to any genre, since he argues that writers tend to produce work that is derivative of existing material, and, therefore, weak.

dealing with such recent popular impressions of Joyce as much as with Joyce's own writing; the commodification of Joyce himself. I make the case that this was because part of Ireland's transformation in the 1990s was a new found cultural identity, which allowed Joyce's profile to be manipulated by tourist organisations. My analysis illuminates Cleary's concern with Jameson's key principle that commodification generates the replacement of economic value by cultural and aesthetic value, creating a culture of copies.<sup>4</sup> I uncover how McCourt relies upon an array of performance principles and Joycean stylistic strategies like allusion, ventriloquism, parody, homage, saturation, imitation, cliché, Irish stereotypes, intertextuality and mimicry. I demonstrate that these are the creative devices by which McCourt claims narrative authority, since they provide him with the means of a critique to engage, affirm or deconstruct 'Irishness, particularly as he was surely aware of Joyce's definition of Ireland as 'the old sow that eats her farrow.'<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, I adapt Cleary's idea of pastiche (as influenced by Jameson), to expose how McCourt's work exemplifies writing that is fragmented by the intertextual reproduction of the aesthetic and textual forms of nostalgia formed by a recycling of the past. Cleary may just as well be referring to Joyce's writing when he says:

Yet however much these fictions work to reassure us at a narrative and cognitive level that this whole world of de Valera's Ireland is now coming to an end [...] and being subsumed into memory [...] they also display a remarkable tendency to cleave at the sensorial level to that world and to avoid and evade any other. Hence there is a recurring dissonance in these works between the cognitive message that they transmit, which is that the Irish have finally come through the sterility of de Valera's Ireland and are ready to move into some new dispensation, and the sensorial dimension, which operates at the level of thick description or the reconstruction of visual landscape to transport us back into a world whose texture and temporality is now our own.<sup>6</sup>

### **McCourt's Anxiety of Influence**

Cleary argues specifically that Joyce continues to tower like a 'literary Mount Rushmore' for later Irish writers, and that while the novelist has become 'normalized by the

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<sup>4</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, pp. 79-81.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 231.

<sup>6</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 230.

Also see, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Harlow: Pearson-Longman, 2004), p. 254.

university, packaged and popularised for consumption by corporation and heritage industries' the very scale of Joyce's ambition and scope of Joycean scholarship continues to 'overshadow all subsequent achievements.'<sup>7</sup> Cleary is emphasising Joyce's revered place in the canon of Irish literature, foregrounding the fact that successive writers might feel daunted by Joyce's influence. Besides using Joyce as a 'benchmark' for a model of 'Irishness', Cleary introduces the notion of appropriation given that Joyce's depiction of the experience of emigration or exile in *A Portrait* might be conceived as both a form of narrative and as a model for the living artist to perform. In line with Cleary's view, Ferdia MacAnna's identification of the 'fear' of Joyce must be considered in the context that any direct or indirect stylistic authority that Joyce wields is accompanied by feelings that range from imitation to anxiety for any author writing from within or about Ireland.<sup>8</sup> MacAnna's concept is commensurate with Harold Bloom's theory of an 'anxiety of influence', where Bloom draws on Freud's idea of *angst for etwas*, 'fear before something' to explain how the reputation and influence of a writer causes a successor to lack confidence in their own work.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, McCourt has been at pains to modify and play with his artistic inheritance, undertaking what Bloom calls clearing 'imaginative space' by a creative misreading or 'misprision' that results in a 'perverse, wilful revisionism' of Joyce's original texts (largely, in McCourt's case, *A Portrait*). In Bloom's terms, as the 'ephebe', McCourt has to find his own voice to silence Joyce, his dominant precursor, whose influence is an example of a 'destruction of desire'.<sup>10</sup>

McCourt's writing shows a repeated awareness of Joyce's influence, and we shall see how he self-consciously cites Joyce at selected moments while at others he begrudgingly or unwillingly embraces the coupling. Thus, with Cleary, Bloom and MacAnna's arguments at the forefront, I examine the extent to which McCourt uses the

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<sup>7</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, pp. 101,103,105.

Also see, Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. vii. Corcoran argues that preconceived ideas about the aesthetics and themes of Irish literature are formed by the 'major' figure of James Joyce standing at the 'entrance to the Irish twentieth century.'

<sup>8</sup> Ferdia MacAnna, 'The Dublin Renaissance: An Essay on Modern Dublin and Dublin Writers', in *The Irish Review*, No. 10 (Spring 1991), 14-30 (p. 18).

<sup>9</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5,7,10,30.

aforementioned stylistic strategies to adopt a Joycean model of the *Bildungsroman* that reveals the growth, maturation and development of the 'artist', and his efforts to find his place in the wide world. Indeed, Paul de Man has identified the association between ventriloquism and life-writing, and I argue that Joyce enabled McCourt to listen to the performed voices of *A Portrait* in order to enact his own history through translation and imitation.<sup>11</sup> To do so McCourt transposes a mode of expression imbued with the Joycean by moving between the serious to the humorous; the mundane to the divine, and the catastrophic to the comic, to re-tell episodes that he purports to have lived. However, Joyce is scarcely a monolith: his varying cultural iterations had become increasingly numerous and bewilderingly varied by the second half of the twentieth century, with the emergence of various cultural products about Joyce (films, T-shirts, historical re-enactments, and so forth) that had little to do with his life or writings, but which often revealed a great deal about contemporary preoccupations with the Edwardian era.<sup>12</sup>

### **James Joyce as Performer**

McCourt told me that he insisted on reading his own works for audio recordings because he wanted to address the listener directly through a sustained effort to mimick each character. Here McCourt is admitting his proclivity for performance and that he self-consciously composed himself in a carefully intended manner. Such performances gave his audiences an insight into how he shaped his racial identity in terms of speech and behaviour according to their expectations. Indeed, McCourt confirmed his determination to convey the nuances within the Limerick dialect and to have these delivered as he wrote them.<sup>13</sup> Thus, as a performer, McCourt sought to test and

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<sup>11</sup> Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', in *MLN*, 94 (1979): 919-930, 1979.

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 183. Attridge maintains that in the years since *Ulysses* was published, the work of critics to demystify it has effectively dismantled the complexity he believes is integral to the act of reading *Ulysses* and to Joyce's project in writing it.

<sup>13</sup> Personal conversation with McCourt at the closing banquet of The American Conference for Irish Studies, 2007.

explore the episodes in his memoirs by acts of impersonation.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Joyce was a public figure who avoided performing in public. He generally left the public reading of his work to others; a significant example being the 1921 séance organised by Valéry Larbaud. Joyce hid behind a screen and was actually quite embarrassed to appear at the applause. The nearest that he ever came to a 'live' public performance was his reading of *Anna Livia Plurabelle* in early November 1927. Joyce's biographer Richard Ellmann notes that Joyce was 'elated' by the responses of the twenty-five friends who heard him read.<sup>15</sup> In a letter dated 4 November 1927, Joyce mentioned the occasion to Harriett Shaw Weaver: 'The reading seems to have made a profound impression on the audience (about 25 people of the world's 1500 million) but I have been literally doubled in two from fatigue and cramp ever since.'<sup>16</sup> McCourt boasted that his own stamina allowed him to write as he travelled the world being Irish, but Joyce found the experience enervating and no other record of Joyce reading in public can be found (although there are two specially made audio recordings of Joyce reading from his own works).<sup>17</sup>

In a 1999 interview for the Academy of Achievement, McCourt introduced Joyce's methodology when asked how he got from the classrooms of New York City public schools to *Angela's Ashes*. McCourt admitted that it took time to develop a style and confessed that in his early-unpublished fiction he did indeed seek to emulate Joyce:

*Angela's Ashes* was germinating all the time [...] I tried [...] around 1967, '68, [...] to write a novel called *If You Live in the Lane* [...] but even though I was 38,

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<sup>14</sup> *Angela's Ashes*, unabridged audio book on CD (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

*'Tis*, unabridged audio book on CD (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

*Teacher Man*, unabridged audio book on CD (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

<sup>15</sup>For a full account see, Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 536-537, 610.

<sup>16</sup> Joyce, quoted in Stuart Gilbert, ed., *Letters of James Joyce* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 260.

<sup>17</sup> McCourt, After-Dinner speech at the closing banquet of The American Conference for Irish Studies, 2007. See Sylvia Beach, *Shakespeare and Company* (London: University of Nebraska, 1956), p.171. Joyce read John F. Taylor's speech from the 'Aeolus' episode, because it 'expressed something he wanted said and preserved in his own voice.'

See The James Joyce Centre, Dublin <<http://www.jamesjoyce.ie/detail.asp?ID=185>> [accessed 16 February 2010].

Also see 'James Joyce reads from *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*', in *Literature*, 23 January 2014 <[tp://www.openculture.com/2014/01/james-joyce-reads-from-ulysses-and-finnegans-wake-in-his-only-two-recordings-19241929.html](http://www.openculture.com/2014/01/james-joyce-reads-from-ulysses-and-finnegans-wake-in-his-only-two-recordings-19241929.html)> [accessed 31 January 2014].



39 years old, I really didn't trust myself. So I was trying to imitate. I was going through a James Joyce phase, *A Portrait of the Artist* phase [...] imitating Joyce, and it didn't work. I put it away.<sup>18</sup>

Although McCourt was clearly fending off any further comparison he emphasised that he eventually developed a very different authorial voice from that of Joyce. Critics have perhaps linked McCourt's writing readily with that of Joyce because McCourt exploits the melodramatic tropes of poverty, death and disease that are familiar in Joyce's writing. Indeed, the list of comparative writers is extended by author Clark Blaise who writes in the 2009 issue of the *Southampton Review* that pays literary homage to McCourt:

Years ago, there was another famous "not quite" memoir, close-to-fiction. It was called *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and it opened up an Irish sub-genre sustained by Liam O'Flaherty, Sean O'Casey, Aidan Higgins, John McGahern and Edna O'Brien, among others. [...] *Angela's Ashes* [...] is the latest-and perhaps, the last in that distinguished series.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, as I highlighted in Chapter 1, Denis Sampson, summarises the influence of O'Casey and Joyce when he categorizes *Angela's Ashes* as being written in 'a style of rambunctious detachment, relying on literary techniques of irony and comedy learned from diverse sources, among them Joyce [...] and Seán O'Casey's plays.'<sup>20</sup> It is this 'rambunctious detachment' that epitomises the uniqueness of McCourt's style. At the Key West Literary seminar on *The Memoir* in 2000, McCourt told delegates that Joyce and O'Casey helped him to 'straddle' his hyphenated status because he was attracted to Irish writers out of loneliness when he returned to New York in 1949.<sup>21</sup> McCourt remembered that he 'discovered' Joyce in the United States Army Base camp library

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<sup>18</sup> Academy of Achievement interview with Frank McCourt, 'A Writer Risen from the Ashes', 19 June 1999 <<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/printmember/mcc1int-1>> [accessed 16 November 2007 and 19 December 2008].

<sup>19</sup> Clark Blaise, 'Smudges on the Photograph: Memoir and McCourt', in *The Southampton Review*, Vol. 111, No. 2, (2009) 122-127 (p. 124).

<sup>20</sup> Denis Sampson, 'Voice Itself: The Loss and Recovery of Boyhood in Irish Memoir', in *Modern Irish Autobiography*, ed. by Liam Harte, pp. 197-213 (p. 197).

<sup>21</sup> McCourt, audio recording of the panel 'Preserving Our History Through Story; Memoir: The Literature of Witness', the Key West Literary Seminar on *The Memoir*, 13-16 January 2000, Disc 13a.

when he was 'drafted' during the Korean War, and claimed that his knowledge of Joyce's fiction 'clinched' his entrance' into New York University.<sup>22</sup>

Although McCourt has never claimed to be a Joycean expert, in his unpublished MA thesis, *'Oliver St John Gogarty: A Critical Study'* that was submitted to Brooklyn College in 1967, McCourt imparts an awareness of Joyce's compositional methods. For example he notes that one of Joyce's 'ingredients' was his 'habit of jotting down scraps of conversation or sudden illuminations.'<sup>23</sup> But, as if to make a concerted effort to discourage any comparison with *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt made known his dislike of *A Portrait* in a 1997 interview for *Book Reporter*. He also responded with hostility to the suggestion that he might be responsible for having 'done for Limerick what Joyce did for Dublin', saying: 'How can you keep your balance in the face of such an outrageous comparison?', McCourt asked:

There is no comparison between Joyce and me. He had a planned approach to his writing. He was an intellectual. I don't have much time for *Portrait of the Artist*. How would YOU like to spend an evening with Stephen Dedalus?<sup>24</sup>

While McCourt intended this remark about Stephen Dedalus to be amusing, he nonetheless confused the fictive with the real.<sup>25</sup> The uncertainty about whether McCourt is influenced by Joyce the writer or by Joyce's fictional creations is one that recurs both in McCourt's own writing and in McCourt's public pronouncements.

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<sup>22</sup> Tom Ashbrook, 'Frank McCourt, Teacher Man', interview with McCourt for *On Point*, 22 November 2005 <<http://onpoint.wbur.org/2005/11/22/frank-mccourt-teacher-man>>. McCourt said that the Principal 'raised her eyebrows' in admiration [accessed 8 June 2008].

<sup>23</sup> McCourt, *Oliver St John Gogarty: A Critical Study* unpublished Master's thesis, submitted to Brooklyn College, New York, May 1967), 1-68 (p. 15). Photocopy acquired 12 November 2009.

<sup>24</sup> *Bookreporter.com* interview with Frank McCourt, 19 February 1997.

<sup>25</sup> McCourt's opinion could have derived from the negative reception of Frederic Ewen's *et al* July 1962 adaptation of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* at the Martinique Theatre, New York.

See Jerry Tallmer's review in *The New York Times*, 7 July 1962, p. 26

<<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F00D1EFB3858137A93CBAB178ED85F468685F9&scp=4&sq=martinique%20theatre%20+%20a%20portrait%20of%20the%20artist%20as%20a%20young%20man&st=cse>> [accessed 1 April 2010]. According to Tallmer, 'the material simply will not adapt.'

## Performative Identity in Joyce and McCourt

Colum McCann's obituary of McCourt exemplifies the way that McCourt has been consistently related to Joyce: 'In many ways [*Angela's Ashes*] reached all the way back to Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as a guide to the notion that whoever we are is whoever we once were.'<sup>26</sup> McCourt's homage to Joyce was apparent even in the New York hospice where he died, in that McCann claimed to have noticed 'an old orange-covered Picador edition' of Joyce's critical essays on display (rather like a religious icon). As an interpreter of Joyce, McCann dwells on how this unread volume contributed to the *mise-en-scène* of McCourt's deathbed 'performance': 'He couldn't read it anymore, but it was there, and that was enough.'<sup>27</sup> This remark suggests that Joyce's 'presence' in the room by McCourt's bedside 'was enough' to sustain McCann's sentimental declaration that McCourt had indeed 'pored through his Joyce.' Nonetheless, despite the daunting reputation and formidable learning of Joyce, McCourt did show himself willing to emulate or parody moments from Joyce's writing. For example, as is well known, Joyce opens *A Portrait* with the tale of 'Baby Tuckoo'.

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow [...] met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo....  
His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.  
He was baby tuckoo.<sup>28</sup>

In recollecting the tale of the moocow, Joyce famously uses language that conjures up a young boy's perception and thought process. Joyce harkens back to childhood with the time-honoured phrase of 'once upon a time' which is familiar from the start of fairy tales written by the Grimm brothers. Alongside the naïve formulations such as short

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<sup>26</sup>Colum McCann, 'Remembering Frank: In the Morning, All Will Be Forgiven', in *Irish America* (October/November 2009), pp. 72-74 (p. 74). Reviewers have opined that the day-in-the-life frame structure of McCann's *Let The Great World Spin* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), calls to mind Joyce's *Ulysses*. McCann also imitates Joyce's word-play.

See Gabriel Packard, 'Colum McCann: The words that matter', in *The Writer Magazine*, 17 July 2013 <<http://www.writermag.com/2013/07/17/the-words-that-matter/>> [accessed 14 February 2014].

<sup>27</sup>McCann, 'Remembering Frank: In the Morning, All Will Be Forgiven', p. 74.

<sup>28</sup>*A Portrait*, p. 7.

sentences that Joyce uses to create the impression of recollections of childhood, he demonstrates the artificial use of expressions for objects that are strange and unknown to Stephen. Furthermore, Joyce reveals the significance of the parental figure. The hairy face that Stephen sees affords his father a God-like demeanour that, together with the subject matter here, summons Biblical prose such as: 'And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so.'<sup>29</sup> Yet the vexed nature of Stephen's relationship with paternal authority might also be identified here: since the archaic or Chaucerian definition of 'nice' is 'stupid', the moocow story predicts Stephen's estrangement from his father at the beginning of Chapter 5: '— Is your lazy bitch of a brother gone out yet? [...] Stephen laughed and said: — He has a curious idea of genders if he thinks a bitch is masculine.'<sup>30</sup>

In summoning his own earliest recollections in *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt echoes what Joyce had written. In McCourt's work we find the following:

Dad set the twins on the road and held out his arms to Malachy. Now the twins started to cry and Malachy clung to Mam, sobbing. The cows mooed, the sheep maaed, the goat ehehed, the birds twittered in the trees, and the beep beep of a motor car cut through everything (p.45).

Here we find exactly those short sentences, naïve syntactical formulations, agrarian imagery, and paternal authority that characterises Joyce's writing about childhood in the 'baby tuckoo' section of *A Portrait*. Of course, the Joycean echo is most evident in the specific image of the mooing cow. But there is also a Joycean delight in sonority here: in the affinity between the 'mooed' and the 'maaed', and the aural connection with the sheep 'maaing' and Malachy crying. After all, as in Stephen's case, the cow might well serve as a maternal provider of milk for the baby. Furthermore, the biblical imagery of sheep and goats again helps to locate this passage in the same world of heightened Irish Catholicism that Stephen famously rebels against. In addition, just as

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<sup>29</sup> *Genesis 1* <<http://www.bibleontheweb.com/Bible.asp>> [accessed 1 December 2009].

<sup>30</sup> *A Portrait*, p. 198.

the use of the moocow in Joyce prepares the way for the sundering of father and son, so in McCourt's work this early reference to the cow has a similar function. Later in *Angela's Ashes*, when McCourt's father is portrayed as 'falling down drunk', he calls the young Frank and his brothers his own 'Red Branch Knights' to tell them tales of the Irish saga *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*.<sup>31</sup>

What is foremost in McCourt's style is the tone of voice that he uses to play upon the bewilderment within the character of his former self who is far removed from the global adventurer who happens to be writing about poverty. In *Angela's Ashes*, Frankie possesses the innocence of the perplexed child, while in *'Tis*, the nineteen-year-old Frank is a newcomer to America and innocent of its customs, so he becomes the disorientated immigrant. In *Teacher Man*, meanwhile, the older Frank is an inexperienced, bewildered teacher trying to navigate his way through the New York City school system. Finally, there is the even more ostensibly bemused successful author who invariably allows his audience to encounter these created Franks. In 2009 McCourt told writer and musician Terence Patrick Winch that when he reflected on how he had created the voice of his former self-progressing from the age of three and a half to nineteen he realised 'that is exactly what James Joyce did in *A Portrait of the Artist*.'<sup>32</sup> McCourt elaborated on this when talking with John Shattuck at the John F. Kennedy Library:

Now that I think of it, it's almost like the opening lines of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*. Once upon a time, there was a moocow coming down the road. Always "once upon a time". And I did that with *Angela's Ashes*. And I think maybe the prose developed somewhat from the age of three to the age of nineteen.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *A Portrait*, p. 15.

*Angela's Ashes*, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> McCourt in conversation with Terence Patrick Winch, 'The Writing Life', 2009 (exact date unknown) <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTyPRnoKe\\_A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTyPRnoKe_A)> [accessed 22 February 2013].

Also see <<http://terencewinch.com/>>, which confirms that the conversation was shortly before McCourt's death in July 2009 [accessed 22 February 2013].

<sup>33</sup> McCourt in conversation with John Shattuck at the John F. Kennedy Library, 10 April 2006 <[www.jfklibrary.org/NR/rdonlyres/872FB3D7-8F09-4EBC2E68CD86C01D4F/26691/FrankMccourt41006](http://www.jfklibrary.org/NR/rdonlyres/872FB3D7-8F09-4EBC2E68CD86C01D4F/26691/FrankMccourt41006)> [accessed 21 October 2009].

McCourt's ostensible Joycean epiphany 'now that I think of it', is somewhat contrived, and it is assured that he has carefully yet deliberately crafted the image of the cow, which has a further implication. McCourt first hears the cows mooing in Toome, Country Antrim — the home of his paternal grandparents. This allows McCourt to contrast the North of Ireland countryside with the urban environment of his maternal grandmother's house in Limerick: 'We all moved [...] down a narrow lane and into another lane to Grandma's house' (p.56). Thus, McCourt not only impersonates Joyce's prose, but by relocating it to other very specific contexts seeks to bolster the veracity of his own memories.

While close textual analysis may authenticate the affinity between the prose of Joyce and that of McCourt, there are also broader stylistic features that the two writers have in common. For example, Joyce's writing style is prominent for the omission of quotation marks, and his decision to indicate indirect speech with a dash, which is exactly what we find in McCourt's work (and that of other contemporary Irish writers, such as Roddy Doyle, with whom McCourt shares aesthetic and thematic affinities).<sup>34</sup> At other times, McCourt and Joyce both use similarly short staccato sentences to mark descriptions of childhood; they use free indirect speech which suddenly lurches into direct speech without the warning of any punctuation marks; and they both take a delight in the phonetic rendering of nonstandard words. With regard to mimicking Joyce's style, McCourt has confessed that when looking over the words on paper, 'before you know it there are echoes of Mr Joyce.' However, McCourt also emphasised that he sought to develop a very different authorial voice from that of Joyce, declaring: 'I stay miles away from Irish writers, especially Joyce [...] [who] is too infectious.'<sup>35</sup>

To be fair to McCourt, he does present themes that are familiar from Joyce's work: themes that range from Ireland itself to death and disease, pre-marital sexual

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<sup>34</sup> See Doyle, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*.

<sup>35</sup> McCourt, interview with Leonard Lapote, WNYC, 15 June 2004  
<<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/episodes/2004/06/15>> [accessed 21 August 2009].

relations, writing, alcoholism, self-loathing, and "begrudgery". Yet it is probably impossible to write in the autobiographical mode within an Irish context without engaging with at least some of these recurring subjects, and these themes certainly mark the work of Irish writers as diverse as Liam O'Flaherty, Nuala O'Faolain, and Shane MacGowan. Some of the ideas that critics have identified as specifically Joycean in McCourt's work may not, therefore, necessarily be encoded as exclusively being any such thing. For example, at one point it looks as though McCourt is undertaking a remarkable re-writing of the hell-fire sermon that Stephen has to endure at the hands of Father Arnall. In Joyce's work the cleric declares: ' — Why did you not give up that lewd habit, that impure habit [...] — O, my dear little brothers in Christ Jesus.'<sup>36</sup> In *Angela's Ashes*, Frank is forced to suffer the same angst from the Redemptorist priest who 'barks at us all the time about the Sixth Commandment', while recalling the priest saying: 'Every time you succumb to the vile sin of self-abuse, you not only nail Christ to the cross you take another step closer to hell itself. Retreat from the abyss, boys. Resist the devil and keep your hands to yourself' (pp.340-341). Yet the influence here is not necessarily to be assumed as a Joycean one: McCourt and Joyce would not be alone in hearing such views from the Catholic priests of twentieth-century Ireland. Indeed, it has become a cliché of Irish writing to incorporate some discussion of the persuasive influence of the Church, the omnipotent power of which was made possible through an education system that rewarded conformist and devout Catholic thinking and behaviour.<sup>37</sup>

Yet even if at times it is difficult to tell whether McCourt is exactly copying Joyce, it seems certain that the two texts, *A Portrait of the Artist* and *Angela's Ashes* do, at many points, express what in Raymond Williams's terms might be thought of as being the same 'structure of feeling', since they share a set of cultural references and

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<sup>36</sup> *A Portrait*, pp. 140-141.

<sup>37</sup> See David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 63. Cairns and Richards argue that by the closing decades of the Nineteenth-Century, the Catholic Church and Eamon de Valera's Government had enormous supremacy in the construction of Irish identity. They were invincible partners in the education of the people-nation and seized absolute control by a system of promoting a version of morality.

tropes.<sup>38</sup> McCourt was, after all, very well versed in *A Portrait*, having read it extensively in order to teach it to his own school pupils in New York, and *Angela's Ashes* uses a range of the same rhetorical devices and structural elements as Joyce's novel. Even with the pervasive example of Catholicism that I have given above, there are many instances where both men take a somewhat wry and mocking attitude to doctrine and devotional practice, and where the language of their mockery converges. For instance, in *A Portrait* Joyce has Stephen reflect that 'the day of your first communion was the happiest day of your life.'<sup>39</sup> In *Angela's Ashes*, meanwhile, we have already heard Frank say: 'First Communion day is the happiest day of your life' (p.141). That syntactical parallelism is followed by both writers striving to parody the orality involved in the sacrament of the Eucharist: in *A Portrait* Stephen is pictured receiving the host into a mouth that has kissed a prostitute at exactly the same point in the preceding chapter.<sup>40</sup> In *Angela's Ashes* the parallel moment comes when the narrator receives the host from the ciborium and declares: 'It's on my tongue. I draw it back. It stuck. I had God glued to the roof of my mouth' (p.141).

Joyce's theory of creativity and aesthetics is one in which emotional and psychological exile plays a pivotal role. Stephen's surname, Dedalus, is also symbolic of the creative urge and of the artist whose intellectual and philosophical awakening is juxtaposed with rebellion against the constraints of Catholicism. And although there are psychic and economic differences in McCourt's leave-taking of Ireland, it provides a similarly decisive climax to *Angela's Ashes*. With worlds that bring to mind Stephen Dedalus's 'flight', McCourt said in a conversation with Brendan O'Shea: 'The real adventure comes when you find your own way. I found my own way without any assistance from Rome, Dublin or London.'<sup>41</sup> Through the distorted lens of time, memory and physical distance, McCourt recreates a disabling Ireland. As a consequence of mediating cultural

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<sup>38</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 132.

<sup>39</sup> *A Portrait*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 167.

<sup>41</sup> McCourt, in conversation with Brendan O'Shea, *Inspired Minds: One-to-one with the late author Frank McCourt*, 27 July 2009 <[http://www.d.world.de/dw/episode/0,427750100.html?maca=en-podcast\\_inspired-minds-947-xml-mrss](http://www.d.world.de/dw/episode/0,427750100.html?maca=en-podcast_inspired-minds-947-xml-mrss)> [accessed 1 August 2009].



difference between Ireland and America, *Angela's Ashes* destabilises the romantic visions of Ireland and mythologizes the emigration experience into a self-affirming mission. Perhaps this is, in part at least, a canny appeal to McCourt's North American readership, but it also links McCourt's character strongly with the reasoning of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus. By the end of *Angela's Ashes* Frank's Irish identity becomes free from 'paralysis', and in doing so McCourt's writing mirrors the way that Joyce uses Stephen to project a developing Irish identity that has a strong understanding of self, enabling both Stephen and Frank to take control of their own fate. Although Stephen's flight created a critical foundation for McCourt to construct his own narrative of journeying from home, Ireland offered an escape for McCourt's physical move rather than Joyce's artistic transcendence. In conclusion, then, although McCourt may at times have proven wary of acknowledging the fact, there are a number of close textual parallels between his best-known work *Angela's Ashes* and Joyce's *Portrait*.

### **James Joyce Today**

In recent years, the imperatives of tourism and nationalism may have marked Joyce as a definitively Irish writer, but in reality he was a cosmopolitan author, illustrated by his signing the end of *Ulysses* 'Trieste-Zurich-Paris'.<sup>42</sup> It is perhaps ironic that in a country that drove him into exile, organisations such as *Aer Lingus* and *Bord Fáilte* project Joyce as an emblem of contemporary Irish culture. Joyce's Chaplinesque comic stance, complete with hat, stick and spectacles, is an instantly recognisable logo that is used to 'sell' the city of Dublin to an international audience; an undoubted attraction for tourists. Indeed, this image of Joyce has become iconic enough to inspire a street artist to startle tourists by performing as a living statue in Grafton Street, attiring himself exactly as Joyce is represented in the 'real' bronze statue.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, in 1993, the Bank of Ireland included Joyce on the front of the Irish ten-pound note, while on the

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<sup>42</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 732.

<sup>43</sup> Living Statue of James Joyce, Grafton Street, Dublin <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaRr7IBdC6o>> [accessed 1 April 2014].

back were the opening lines of *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>44</sup> Of course, little of this required a very profound engagement with Joyce's writings themselves: indeed, Timothy Brennan contends that since the national symbol of Joyce was being used as an advertisement for foreign investment at a time of globalisation, this commodification enhanced the complexity of distinguishing Joyce's iconic image from the iconoclasm within his work.<sup>45</sup>

When considering the idea of Joyce as a 'brand', the public nature of 'Bloomsday' in particular confirms apprehensions about the paradoxes of Joyce as a national icon. The event blurs the line between a literary affair and a tourist gimmick, making its judgement as art secondary. As a consequence, Joyce becomes more decentred in scholarship as he becomes more fixed in popular culture. In his poem 'Who Killed James Joyce?', Patrick Kavanagh satirises the magnates of the Joyce industry through a parody of 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' to demolish pompous and solemn academics whose idea of happiness is the discovery of some trivial allusion in *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>46</sup> In turn, David Lloyd contends that 'national or ethical material cultures' that are presented to tourists cross a boundary so that cultural value passes into kitsch. 'Bloomsday' is blatantly kitsch because ethnic identity is over-performed and consumed out of context, becoming a prime example of what Lloyd terms the 'devolution' of 'authentic national culture'; an outstanding example of the complex relationship between connection and distanciation, and one that goes beyond the typical tourist relationship of material consumption. As Lloyd would have it, Bloomsday functions not only as 'congealed memory' but also as a connected identity marker necessary for the performance of attenuated ethnicity.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See 'Joyce coin on sale – with misprint', in *Independent.ie*, 12 April 2013 <<http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/joyce-coin-on-sale-with-misprint-29190216.html>> [accessed 1 April 2014]. On 11 April 2013, ten thousand €10 commemorative coins went on sale at the Irish Central Bank for €46 each. The coin featuring Joyce's face, and an incorrect quotation, increased the value to €160 per coin.

<sup>45</sup> See Timothy Brennan, *At Home In The World: Cosmopolitanism Now (Convergences: Inventories of the Present)*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 155-163.

<sup>46</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Who Killed James Joyce?', in *Collected Poems* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1964), pp. 117-118.

<sup>47</sup> Lloyd, 'The Recovery of Kitsch', in *Ireland After History*, 89-100 (pp. 89-92). Paradoxically, 'Bloomsday' projects the kind of inauthenticity most commonly associated with the tourist experience, while still conforming to what Lloyd argues functions as a representative figuration of a culture, operating as an easily-identifiable marker of presumed authentic Irish identity.

Thus, in Lloyd's terms the Dublin of *Ulysses* is now a site of performance, exemplified in the way that 7 Eccles Street, the fictional home of Leopold and Molly Bloom, has become a flagship of national tourism even though the house no longer exists and only remnants of the front door dwells at the James Joyce Centre on North Great George Street. Literary tourism is a type of secular pilgrimage. As Dorothy Eagle and Hilary Carnell have said: 'There is a fascination about places associated with writers that has often prompted readers to become pilgrims, to visit a Birthplace and contemplate the surroundings of an author's childhood, to see with fresh eyes places that inspired poems or books, to pay homage at a graveside or public memorial.'<sup>48</sup> Participants are implicated in the theatricality of perceiving themselves in a moment in time within the text. They perform in the imprecise zone between the past and the present, perhaps seeking to gain new insights into [the writer's] life and art, even if – as the *Irish Times* delights in reporting every June – few of those who participate in Bloomsday ever seem to have read any of Joyce's writing. It is possible that the remnants of Bloom's front door attracts the sort of devotee who sees Joyce as a national commodity and Dublin as a representation of Irish identity, thereby engaging with both community and cultural identity.

In much the same way, tourists are now – albeit in smaller numbers – attracted to Limerick as the stage for *Angela's Ashes*, exemplifying the phenomenon that Diane Negra identifies as 'invented Irishness'. Negra's expression correlates to my argument about the performative/self-fashioning aspect of McCourt's writing, in the context of Limerick being a site of literary tourism through the commodification of 'Irishness'. As Negra contends, the expatriate McCourt produced an Irish-themed memoir in the 'Celtic Tiger' period in tandem with what some critics term the 'theme parking of Ireland', as pressures intensified for the nation to remake itself for tourist consumption. As I stated in the introductory chapter, McCourt's literary success is a

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<sup>48</sup> Dorothy Eagle and Hilary Carnell, *The Oxford Literary Guide to the British Isles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. v.

manifestation of the unparalleled level of artistic development and accomplishment that marked Ireland as a land of cultural vitality when global audiences became attuned to the consumption of 'Irishness' in print, film, television and drama. Negra is concerned with how the mythical vision of an unblemished Ireland is at odds with the consumerism that *Angela's Ashes* has fostered for Celtic themed merchandise, particularly as 'Irishness' in 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland became a 'buy-into' category.<sup>49</sup> This situation reiterates the irony that the potential for marketing a tale of Irish poverty emerged precisely because of this period of economic boom. Attention was drawn to the autobiographical connection between McCourt and Limerick when *The Irish Examiner* reported that Frank McCourt's widow, Ellen, was to unveil a bronze bust of McCourt outside Leamy's School on 13 May 2010 that would mirror the one of Joyce in Dublin.<sup>50</sup> Thus, echoing the way in which *Ulysses* has helped bolster Dublin's international tourist credentials, so Limerick hopes to use its McCourt heritage in much the same way. In fact, interest in McCourt as an historical figure has helped invigorate and refocus Limerick's tourist trade, with the launch, for example, of a McCourt walking trail in which participation creates the sensation of belonging and activates a sense of acquisition that derives from the desire to walk in McCourt's footsteps and re-imagine textual scenes through his eyes.<sup>51</sup> This experience exemplifies the complex relationship between Lloyd's notion of 'connection and distancing', by operating as an easily-identifiable marker of presumed authentic Irish identity as participants seek a new reality based on the tangible remains of the past.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Diana Negra, 'The Irish In Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture', in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. by Diane Negra (London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 1-19 (pp. 4, 5, 6, 9).

<sup>50</sup> Jimmy Woulfe, 'Bronze Bust of McCourt for City', in *Irish Examiner*, 22 April 2010. This event was witnessed personally. Leamy's School is now the Frank McCourt Museum. See <<http://examiner.ie/ireland/mccourt-museum-opens-its-doors-161089.htm>> [accessed 4 May 2012].

<sup>51</sup> Guided and do-it-yourself walking tours of the *Angela's Ashes* district emphasise the city's wholesale redevelopment and relative prosperity, leaving no trace of 'the Lanes' that are central to the memoir. Limerick's Dickensian cityscape has changed since urban renewal obliterated the blight. Since 2012 Noel Curtain has undertaken the daily conducted tour that was started by Michael O'Donnell in 1998. It departs from Limerick Tourist Office at 14.30, Tel: 087 6353648.

<sup>52</sup> Lloyd, 'The Recovery of Kitsch', pp. 89-92.

Before the opening of the Frank McCourt Museum in 2011, a restored Georgian house and garden at 2 Pery Square contained an evocative 'Ashes Exhibition' that intended to mimic McCourt's childhood home. In June 2000, this constructed site sought to persuade tourists that they were experiencing an event based on historical actuality and that they were sharing in 'real' Limerick culture. A sheet of plastic simulated floodwater and a synthetic fire burned in an upstairs grate as a facsimile of the scene in *Angela's Ashes* where the family have to move to escape the water from the winter rains that had flooded the lower floor.<sup>53</sup> This act of simulation has been extended further at the Museum where the "flea-infested beds" that were used in Alan Parker's film are now included in the recreation of the McCourt home in Roden Lane. The somewhat iconic red 'American' coat that Emily Watson wore in her portrayal of Angela McCourt is displayed on the bed.<sup>54</sup> Thus, McCourt's former school is now a consciously constructed site of spectacle and display merged with the nostalgic attraction of heritage. And the obviousness of the construction is key to the attraction of the exhibit: tourists do not want to see a bed full of real fleas, they want to see beds *from a film* that look as though they have fleas in them (going home from holiday with a flea infestation not generally being considered an indication of a good trip). Similarly, seeing a coat that a contemporary film star from a favourite movie has imbued with a sense of glamour may be as much of an appeal as a coat worn by an historical figure. And if tourists want to see McCourt's school, they must be reassured that this is a 'former' school: with those who run such a site being at pains to show that the location has now been equipped with fire exits for safety and entertaining features to examine. Concomitant with Lloyd's persuasive argument about cultural value passing into kitsch

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<sup>53</sup> *Angela's Ashes*, p. 104. See, 'Limerick ... A great place to look at and take part in', pamphlet produced by the Limerick Tourism Trade Association (Spring 2010).

Also see, Éibhir Mulqueen, 'Slums of 'Angela's Ashes' reborn as heritage attraction', in *Irish Times*, 21 June 2000 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/slum-of-angela-s-ashes-reborn-as-heritage-attraction-1.284489>> [accessed 12 May 2015]. The Building became the Headquarters for 2014 Limerick, City of Culture. See Alan Owens, 'Georgian House to be HQ for Limerick City of Culture', in *Limerick Leader*, 12 July 2013 <<http://www.limerickleader.ie/what-s-on/arts-entertainment/georgian-house-to-be-hq-for-limerick-city-of-culture-1-5277799>> [accessed 12 July 2013].

<sup>54</sup> When I visited the Museum in February 2013, Curator Una Heaton pointed out the "fleas" she had made to add authenticity to this re-created scene.

See Kathryn Hayes, 'In Frank's footsteps: McCourt Museum opens', in *The Irish Times*, 15 July 2011 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2011/0715/1224300761910.html>> [accessed 29 July 2011].

is Marita Sturken's observation that the experiences of memory tourism are inevitably caught up with the practices of consumerism. In Sturken's terms the Frank McCourt Museum exemplifies a site of mediated return through which tourists create the experience of memory because traces of events from *Angela's Ashes* can be felt. Furthermore, the museum displays employ 're-enactment strategies to evoke memories; pedagogy [that aim[s] to educate; souvenir consumerism; and kitsch', both in terms of objects and narrative sentiment.<sup>55</sup> However, this 'kitschification of memory' produces 'engagements that Sturgen argues are as cheap as trinkets' while being seen as a 'device for making history less distant and less sure; a playing with the past that can open it up to rethinking.'<sup>56</sup> Sturgen calls for a critical vigilance because this mode of re-enactment provides a 'faux closeness', as well as allowing histories to be 'commodified, trivialized, and rescripted.'<sup>57</sup> There is, thus, a complex blend of history and fiction here, and such notions of manufacture also correlate to Negra's term of 'invented Irishness', something that also needs to be kept in mind when investigating McCourt's version of the Joycean in his public speaking endeavours.

### **McCourt's 'Second Act' as a Global Performer: Joycean Shadows? <sup>58</sup>**

When McCourt retired from teaching in 1987, he embarked upon a second career as a prize-winning author. He undertook a global tour of public speaking and reading from his memoirs at literary festivals and conferences after the success of *Angela's Ashes* in 1996, until his death in July 2009. However, when McCourt performed his first public reading at the Rizzoli Bookstore in New York, it was not anticipated that he would be immortalised as the 'father of the misery memoir', and blamed for starting an epidemic of such writing with *Angela's Ashes*. The extent to which McCourt had to 'perform' was observed by Scribner's publicity assistant, Erin Cox, who witnessed how

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<sup>55</sup> Marita Sturken, 'Pilgrimages, Reenactment, and Souvenirs: Modes of Memory Tourism', in *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, ed by Nancy K Miller and Marianne Hirsch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) pp. 280-293 (pp. 281, 283).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 284, 291.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>58</sup> *Teacher Man*, p. 2.

the Pulitzer Prize encouraged the filmic adaptation of *Angela's Ashes*, the potent combination of which augmented the demand for personal interviews, television appearances and opportunities for McCourt to perform.<sup>59</sup> In all his endeavours McCourt spoke without notes to audiences that are too numerous and geographically dispersed to report on in detail. McCourt confirms this point when he says in the prologue to *Teacher Man*: 'I spoke to gatherings of dentists, lawyers, ophthalmologist, and, of course, teachers. I travelled the world being Irish [...] an authority on misery of all kinds.'<sup>60</sup>

In July 2009, Harriett Gilbert eulogised about McCourt's public showmanship to Joseph Hurley, the theatre critic for New York's *Irish Echo*, and a long-time friend of McCourt's. Although Hurley acknowledges that McCourt's skill had been honed from his acting roles at New York's Irish Repertory Theatre, he stresses that McCourt was much the same in private.<sup>61</sup> While it is worth noting that Hurley is writing from an Irish-American perspective, he is inadvertently drawing attention to how McCourt's behaviour exemplifies elements of what Eugenio Barba labels 'extra daily activity' (an extension of Erving Goffman's sociological contention that everyday life can be considered theatrical since individuals rehearse before acting out various behaviours for different audiences.<sup>62</sup> Although I deconstructed this concept in Chapter 3 in relation to Fred Astaire's cinematic performances, for the purpose of this chapter Barba's theory illuminates how McCourt's personal appearances provided him with 'extra-daily' situations with which to rehearse, act out, and critique various 'Irish' behaviours. McCourt was constantly in demand as a keynote speaker, with his 'Irishness' being the key-marker used to attract an audience, one example being the personal experience of witnessing McCourt as the after-dinner speaker at the American Conference for Irish

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<sup>59</sup> Erin L. Cox, 'Frank McCourt and the Texas Kid: What I Learned About Private Planes, Irish Accents, and Fame' <<http://publishingperspectives.com/?p=2592>> [accessed 13 March 2010].

<sup>60</sup> *Teacher Man*, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Hurley, Theatre critic for the *Irish Echo* in New York, quoted in *The Strand*, 20 July 2009 <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p003nvqk/The\\_Strand\\_20\\_07\\_2009/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p003nvqk/The_Strand_20_07_2009/)> [accessed 22 February 2010].

<sup>62</sup> Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology*, trans. by Richard Fowler (London: Routledge, 1995[1993]), pp. 15-16, 26.

Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 124-125.

Studies on 21 April 2007.<sup>63</sup> A further example of McCourt going to special lengths to demonstrate 'Irish' characteristics can be seen in the documentary *Frank McCourt: The Journey of an Ordinary Teacher*.<sup>64</sup> Within such oratories, McCourt combined the experience gained from the challenge of teaching with the arrangement of delivering lines in a set theatre piece. Ultimately, McCourt's audience both expected and desired to hear the much-practised 'script' of his life, and McCourt himself obliged by re-creating the Frank McCourt of whom he writes.

We have already examined how McCourt says in *'Tis*: 'There are times when I wish I could reach into my mouth and tear my accent out by the roots. Even when I try to sound American people look puzzled and say, Do I detect an Irish brogue?'<sup>65</sup> Yet, it is impossible to ignore the paradox that this is written by a writer whose very 'Irishness' has been exploited by his publishers to advance global sales. Thus, rather than portray himself openly as more American than Irish, the success of *Angela's Ashes* ensured that McCourt spoke consistently at public events in deference to his audience's expectations. He may once have enjoyed a more mutable and nuanced set of identities, but upon gaining widespread literary success, McCourt underwent a metamorphosis into the definitive Limerickman, emphasising in *'Tis* that upon arrival in New York he was encouraged to 'stick with your own.'<sup>66</sup> McCourt perfected his 'Irish act', to such an extent that, although he is obviously adopting the persona that he gives to himself within his memoirs, he can never be Frank McCourt, the New Yorker. Yet, the success of his style is such a determining factor in the precision of an act that his prodigious public speaking events require McCourt to return to the aforementioned innocence of his protagonist-speakers. As McCourt notes in *'Tis*, during his time at New York University, 'whenever an Irish writer is mentioned, or anything Irish, everyone turns to me as if I'm the authority. Even the professors seem to think I know all about

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<sup>63</sup> McCourt, After-Dinner speech at the closing banquet of The American Conference for Irish Studies, 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Debra Weinstein's interview with Frank McCourt for NYU Steinhart, *Frank McCourt: The Journey of an Ordinary Teacher*, 20 July 2009 <dailymotion.com> [accessed 19 April 2015].

<sup>65</sup> *'Tis*, p. 174.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.



Irish literature and history [...] it's the same with Catholicism.<sup>67</sup> This is an issue that McCourt constantly reiterates to entertain his audience in all of his public speaking undertakings. After making his fortune in the late-1990s, the image of McCourt as a jet-setter provided a telling counterpoint to the McCourt who writes about poverty. Even so, concentration on his 'miserable Irish Catholic childhood' can be witnessed in a 2009 address to Manhattan's Hudson Union Society. McCourt talks with irony about Catholicism, the hierarchy of sins and the after-death destinations, drawing his audience's attention to Joyce's *A Portrait*, particularly the chapter that McCourt describes as the priest's 'awesome' sermon on sin, and self-consciously linking his own experience with the content of Joyce's novel. The audience's amusement and enthusiastic engagement with McCourt's performance is clear, and underscores the point that McCourt was able to manipulate an audience who may have wanted to hear Joycean links.<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, it is possible that there is a sadistic element attached to the way that McCourt's audiences enjoy learning about Frank's experience in *Angela's Ashes* from the comfort of their own lives. Although the sociologist Frank Furedi is somewhat harsh in calling *Angela's Ashes* 'literary pornography', he quite rightly argues that by participating in the miserable contents of the memoir the audience creates an obsession within themselves to both revel in and partake in the author's pain.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, in recent years readers have found enough morbid pleasure in what the High Street bookseller Waterstones call 'mis lit' to enable the creation of a 'painful lives' subsection. Publishing houses rely upon this 'inspirational literature' to appeal to the reader's voyeuristic impulse that is rationalised because authors tell of their personal triumph over tragedy. While Furedi is pointing out the salacious element that attracts

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<sup>67</sup> *Tis*, pp. 184 -185.

<sup>68</sup> McCourt, address to the Hudson Union Society, Manhattan, 6 April 2009  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr4pVemhatk> > [accessed 16 February 2010].

<sup>69</sup> Frank Furedi, quoted in *The Strand*, 20 July 2009  
<[http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p003nvqk/The\\_Strand\\_20\\_07\\_2009/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p003nvqk/The_Strand_20_07_2009/)> [accessed 22 February 2010].

readers, the mass appeal of such writing dates back to Charles Dickens's novels *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*, for example, which enjoyed a similar reception.<sup>70</sup>

At the aforementioned personal experience of hearing McCourt speak at the closing Banquet after the American Conference for Irish Studies in 2007, I witnessed how McCourt was apt to refer to Joyce in a somewhat vague and non-specific way that had more to do with contemporary perceptions of Joyce than with a detailed knowledge of Joyce's oeuvre.<sup>71</sup> McCourt spoke in the context of being an internationally known Irish-American whose association with City University, New York made him the ideal orator.<sup>72</sup> On this occasion, McCourt sought particularly to emphasise the historical veracity of his memoirs. However, McCourt 'played' to his audience of academics and Irish studies students, commenting wryly that he had a stack of bibliographical references in one pocket and a pile of index cards in the other. Addressing the issue of writing, McCourt said that James Joyce proved that there is nothing wrong with 'once upon a time', albeit McCourt maintained that the last thing he wanted for himself was to write a 'literary book': 'I don't say that in a derogatory sense — for years, I was trying on all these different voices; Joycean, Faulknerian [...] If I had succeeded, I don't think anyone would have connected with *Angela's Ashes*. What I tried to do was to tell this story simply and directly. I didn't want a style at all.'<sup>73</sup> That concluding disavowal was of course weakened by the preceding observations, which admitted to having tried Faulkner's technique of circumlocution and Joyce's 'stream of consciousness' before allegedly 'stumbling' upon the child narrator. McCourt also quoted from *Angela's Ashes* to underscore this argument that although the 'ingredients' for his writing were profound memories of 'the miserable Irish Catholic childhood' that was permeated by 'pompous priests and 'bullying schoolmasters', his aesthetic methodology was grounded in his Irish literary predecessors, particularly

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<sup>70</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London: Penguin, 2004[1860]).

Dickens, *David Copperfield* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008[1850]).

<sup>71</sup> McCourt, After-Dinner Speech at the closing banquet of The American Conference for Irish Studies, 2007.

<sup>72</sup> It has to be acknowledged that within this nexus there is a strong element of effusive mutual goodwill.

<sup>73</sup> McCourt, After-Dinner Speech at the closing banquet of The American Conference for Irish Studies, 2007.

Seán O'Casey and James Joyce (p.1). However, the irony that a tale of poverty encased in these 'ingredients' was to become one of the most commercially successful texts written in the memoir boom of the 1990s was not lost on McCourt who made light of his 'big shot mega mick' status within his speech. Through observing McCourt speak in a public forum, I saw the way in which he was able to evoke Joycean ideas and themes in order to complicate any idea that his writings were located straightforwardly in either New York or in Limerick. For those of us in attendance at these talks, McCourt was keen to make clear that Dublin retained a presence in his writing. While McCourt's Irish accent was a central element in this performance of self, paradoxically, in his life-writing America and American culture represent something to which McCourt aspired, epitomising the success, confidence and material comfort that might not have been so straightforwardly available to him in Irish narratives of self. However, by acting out a version of the Joycean, McCourt engaged with the issue that American culture is also constructed, and pointed to the complications involved in American signifiers of 'Irishness'.

The experience that McCourt gained from his diverse public engagements was supplemented by a period of his being appointed writer-in-residence at the University of Limerick. McCourt mentioned this in April 2005 when discussing his subsequent three-month writer-in-residence tenure at *The Savoy*, London, during which he wrote some of *Teacher Man*.<sup>74</sup> McCourt stated that, like Joyce, he wanted to write 'any time, anywhere.' He said: 'When I read about Joyce, I realised that there was no eight till one in his life, it was 24 hours a day for him.'<sup>75</sup> Such a parallel perhaps tells us more

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<sup>74</sup> Gébler, 'Author whose first and best-known book was his extraordinary memoir *Angela's Ashes*', in *The Guardian*, 20 July 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jul/20/frank-mccourt-obituary>> [accessed 5 January 2014].

McCourt wrote more of this third memoir in Rome. See Barry Egan, 'The Roman spring of Frank McCourt', in *Independent.ie*, 26 May 2002 <<http://www.independent.ie/unsorted/features/the-roman-spring-of-frank-mccourt-501264.html>> [accessed 10 August 2009].

<sup>75</sup> Sandra Geeble, 'My Work Space', interview with Frank McCourt, in *The Guardian*, 23 April 2005 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2005/apr/23/features.jobsmoney15>> [accessed 7 February 2010].

about McCourt than about Joyce, who certainly never achieved the same kind of financial rewards or residency at *The Savoy*.

At an address given in January 2006, McCourt again cited Joyce when talking about the difficulties encountered in writing *Teacher Man*. McCourt said that he was forced to take the advice that he had frequently preached in the classroom to 'begin at the beginning; once upon a time – just as Joyce did in *A Portrait Of the Artist*.<sup>76</sup> In the same vein, when journalist Charlie Rose interviewed McCourt in September 1999, immediately after the publication of *'Tis* and just before the release of the cinematic adaptation of *Angela's Ashes*, he asked McCourt about the writing process. When pressed about exactly how he combined memoir writing with his heavy promotional schedule after the success of *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt said that he determined that if Joyce could write in Zurich, Trieste and Paris under the most difficult circumstances then he could do the same, the result being *'Tis*. Of course, McCourt again neglected to acknowledge that he enjoyed much more material comfort than Joyce. While such a dedicated approach to the writing process can be applied to any writer, McCourt said that his inspiration came from Joyce's boast that he could write anywhere and that Joyce's words 'lit a fire in my head' after re-reading them in Richard Ellmann's biography.<sup>77</sup> It is plausible that McCourt was responding to Ellmann as an interpreter of Joyce, particularly as Ellmann foregrounds Joyce's continued relevance to literary scholarship. But McCourt's response also fuels the argument that biographies are essentially written to enhance the reading practices of those for whom biography is an appealing genre, and McCourt may, at times, have been more influenced by the biography than by Joyce's fiction.<sup>78</sup> Certainly one of the hallmarks of Ellmann's Joyce is

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<sup>76</sup> McCourt, keynote address, The New York State Writers Institute, 24 January 2006

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_x8yZaKGMbU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_x8yZaKGMbU) > [accessed 5 February 2006.]

Also see, McCourt, keynote address at the AWP Annual Conference, Albany, 15 April 1999

<<http://www.albany.edu/writersinst/webpages4/archives/mccourt.html> > [accessed 5 February 2010].

<sup>77</sup> McCourt, interview with Charlie Rose <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mxPk7PCxsE>> [accessed 5 February 2010].

<sup>78</sup> Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p. 3. Ellmann's monumental biography was highly influential at the time of publication and continues to dominate Joyce studies. Ellmann's resists theorising about Joyce by foregrounding the minutiae of Joyce's daily life and culture and his considerable financial woes, choosing

Joyce's humanity, the centrality of love to Joyce's fiction, and the need for Joyce to gain artistic self-liberation in the face of circumstances that did not look promising. Ellmann therefore made Joyce into an appealing, if not heroic, figure for emulation. And at times we might suspect that McCourt had set about acting out a version of Ellmann's Joyce rather than Joyce's Joyce.

## Conclusion

Cleary's argument that Joyce's revered place as a 'literary Mount Rushmore' with a reputation that 'overshadow[s] all subsequent achievements' helps to explain why McCourt uses Joyce as a muse to sketch and design an identity, and why some of McCourt's stylistic devices and methods are directly traceable to Joyce's technique in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.<sup>79</sup> As McCourt says of Joyce in the short film documentary *Joyce to the World* that examines the global phenomenon of *Bloomsday on Broadway*: 'Joyce started the ball rolling [...] We all owe him so much.'<sup>80</sup> And McCourt does owe Joyce a great deal. When McCourt's writing achieved international success in the 1990s, McCourt himself became a speaker who was in demand at sites of performance around the world. At this point, the Joycean ideas and themes that he had explored in his writing now became central to the persona that McCourt enacted and projected in public forums, and harvesting selected Joycean ideas and themes allowed him to perform a multifaceted Irish-American identity. McCourt's compulsion to repeat and re-enact a version of the Joycean echoes Linda Hutcheon's idea that gratification is derived from the palimpsestic doubleness achieved by melding the new

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anecdote and citation above analysis and interpretation. Ellmann writes: 'We are still learning to be James Joyce's contemporaries, to understand our interpreter.'

Also see William S. Brockman, 'Learning to be James Joyce's Contemporary? Richard Ellmann's Discovery and Transformation of Joyce's Letters and Manuscripts', in *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1999), 253-263 (p. 253). Brockman contends that Ellmann's involvement with family, friends, and collectors of Joycean ephemera ensured that he was able to monopolize sources for his own ends.

<sup>79</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, pp. 101,103,105.

Also see, Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. vii. Corcoran argues that preconceived ideas about the aesthetics and themes of Irish literature are formed by the 'major' figure of James Joyce standing at the 'entrance to the Irish twentieth century.'

<sup>80</sup> McCourt, *Joyce to the World*, produced by Fritzi Horstman, (Fritzfilms) Choices, Inc. PPR. ISBN: 978-1-933724-14-0 (2007).

with the familiar to produce the 'pleasure of repetition with variation.'<sup>81</sup> This act of re-invention can be compared with the child's delight in hearing the same nursery rhymes and favourite stories over again since the repetition of this ritual brings comfort and a fuller understanding to the reader. McCourt's involvement in *Bloomsday on Broadway*, juxtaposed with his willingness to speak of Joyce on so many occasions, may actually reveal something similar, and ultimately tells us more about late twentieth-century perceptions of Joyce than anything about Joyce himself.<sup>82</sup> As both this chapter and the preceding one argue, part of the popularity of *Angela's Ashes* is that it imitates so effectively elements of melodrama, irony, comedy and tragedy that McCourt learnt from Boucicault, O'Casey and Joyce.

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<sup>81</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2013[2006]), pp. 33,73,120.

<sup>82</sup> See, McCourt, foreword to *yes I said yes I will Yes*, ed. by Nola Tully (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), pp. ix-xiii.

## Conclusion

The immense international readership that Frank McCourt's life-writing gathered has resulted in his work becoming much known but little analysed. Indeed, he has sometimes been dismissed easily as a commercially driven or an aesthetically and politically naïve writer. This thesis serves as an important corrective to this critical dismissal and has redressed this neglect resolutely.

My overall argument is that the identity expressed by McCourt in both his life-writing and public forums is a conscious performance. I have proved this claim by outlining the diverse ways in which he fashions a self-portrayal from a sustained engagement with collages of literary, theatrical, cinematic and popular performance traditions. The thesis has established that in McCourt's work we can recognise many sources that range from the Irish language tradition, storytelling, nationalistic songs, the popular music of New York City, Hollywood films, other memoirs, Joycean literature, stage and screen melodrama and theatre, as well as Catholic ritual, and popular expressions of Irish identity like 'Bloomsday' celebrations. I have proved that McCourt, as writer, utilises this meta-textual 'framework' deliberately to make particular points about his Irish-American identity, deploying recognisable signifiers of 'Irishness' to organise his experiences in a way that appeals to disparate audiences across both the American and global market.

Throughout the thesis, I have employed a method of analysis that couples close-readings of McCourt's life-writing with attention to socio-cultural context, aesthetic form and issues of representations of 'Irishness'. My research has encompassed cultural histories of Ireland, American and Irish-America, as well as literary and theatrical criticism. McCourt's writing for stage performance, personal emails, interviews, personal appearances, broadcasts and sound recordings have also been consulted. My key critical approach has been adapted from the postcolonial theories of

political performance that have been created by Victor Merriman and Joe Cleary, whose perspectives have been modified to analyse the impact that McCourt's writing and his other 'performances' have had upon global impressions of Ireland in the era of the 'Celtic Tiger'. I have combined Merriman's premise that in performance we can see the basic idea of Irish culture being resistant to modernism and, therefore, Ireland never properly decolonised, with Cleary's notion of disassociation of past and present and his concern with the social and cultural implications of Ireland's uncritical embrace of a form of capitalist modernisation.

I have made the case that in his writing McCourt creates a version of 'Irishness' that abounds with recurring clichés and stereotypical characters. Each chapter has scrutinised how he fashions a national and cultural identity by reworking and revitalising his impoverished, traumatic childhood, measuring his experiences against recognisable political, economic and social realities in Éamon de Valera's Ireland of the 1930s and 1940s. My research has supported my claim that McCourt's performative model permits him to reinforcing the connection between his life experience and the narrative of the nation. As the thesis contended, McCourt's memoir trilogy follows his journey from boyhood to manhood in a manner that mirrors the parallel process of Ireland's journey into independence and economic prosperity in the 'Celtic Tiger' era, when Ireland and 'Irishness' became desirable commodities. Furthermore, Cleary and Merriman's idea that writers gain a hold over the past by embracing and perpetuating outmoded representations of 'Irishness', has allowed me to uncover the ways in which McCourt's 'backward' look reveals that, as a 'colonized' subject, he has internalised colonial stereotypes to the extent that he has difficulty transcending them. My assessment has determined how McCourt's work appeals to his Irish and American audiences simultaneously by making use of the dual nationality and fluid identity that being Irish-American affords him, whereby he condemns conditions in Éamon de Valera's Ireland at the same time that he exhibits a sense of nostalgia for the past. As a consequence, each chapter has established that McCourt's deployment of cultural



memory and performances of identity function, when 'read' to either deconstruct or cement essentialist notions of nationality or ethnicity.

Yet, as the introductory chapter stated, the overall effect arising from the intricacies encountered by McCourt in his investigation of his own self-fashioning has provoked questioning of those notions of national identity that might be presumed established and permanent. This notion of hybridity in identity comes at some cost and raises the question of McCourt's credibility as an Irish commentator. The thesis has revealed that in order to be considered an 'Irish' writer McCourt has to mobilise certain forms of behaviour that are popularly understood as Irish. Thus, he engages in the act of self-fashioning to construct a form of 'Irishness' that is defined by the aforementioned performative signifiers. To authenticate my argument, I have re-shaped Stephen Greenblatt's definition and discussion of the term self-fashioning to illuminate how McCourt constructs his identity deliberately from certain social and cultural codes and conventions, and 'cultural institutions' like family, religion and state.<sup>1</sup> This methodology has sustained my argument that McCourt draws upon the aforementioned performance tropes and recognisable signifiers to style himself according to some perceived/clichéd/mythical 'Irishness' while, simultaneously, being quite aware of doing so and challenging these control mechanisms and codes. Indeed, I have uncovered how the aesthetic effect of McCourt's work actually demolishes any simplistic notion of his being either an uncomplicated American or Irish writer. In fact, the thesis has identified the ways in which being Irish-American has contributed to McCourt's self-definition, and that the 'Irishness' within his life-writing is not a coherent and stable phenomenon, but more a palimpsest that reveals the influence of these numerous other cultural ideas, many of which may originate from far outside the island of Ireland.

The structuring principles required to prove my thesis were undertaken in five distinct chapters. Chapter 1 argued that new perspectives on McCourt's writing have been

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<sup>1</sup> Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, pp. 1-2, 56.

formed through the efforts of filmmakers, musicians and stage and screen adaptors, and this was affirmed through my analysis of how *Angela's Ashes* has itself been re-performed and co-opted. I based my argument on the premise that because McCourt's own creative process has been so reliant upon his sense of drama and performance, it is little surprise that, in the years after *Angela's Ashes* was published, cinematic thinkers such as Alan Parker or theatre groups such as Derby's Uncontained Arts would recognise the covert potential for dramatic performance that resides in McCourt's texts, and attempt to put his words into the mouths of actors. My analysis of these two stage and screen adaptations explicated how the characters that McCourt created on the page have been re-presented for the spectator, thereby demonstrating Merriman's point that 'theatrical figures from the past 'have 'radical potential' because 'significant theatre is as much about the reinterpretation of existing work as it is about the creation of the new.'<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Linda Hutcheon has defined adaptations as 'repetition without replication' [...] 'a kind of extended palimpsest,' and I broadened her explanation by offering the possibility that McCourt's text is malleable enough – and contains enough subversive and contradictory material from the realm of Irish theatre – to allow future adapters to speak more meaningfully to socially and politically aware audiences.<sup>3</sup>

From this starting point, I attested to the fact that McCourt's writings rely for their effect on so many forms of different dramatic performance, both tragic and comic, and so it is not difficult to see how future dramatic thinkers of varying sorts might continue to find an ongoing potential for performance in this man's work. Although I used only two specific examples of such adaptations I revealed that there exists a number of other such projects that take McCourt's writing as the basis for subsequent performative explorations of diasporic, Irish, and migrant experience.<sup>4</sup> I have

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<sup>2</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, pp. 203.

<sup>3</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, pp. 33, 173.

<sup>44</sup> See for example, Carole Talan, 'Artists for Literacy Support', in *Connection*, Issue No. 21 (March 2002), Library of California, <[http://www.library.ca.gov/newsletter/2002/CSL\\_Connection\\_Mar02.pdf](http://www.library.ca.gov/newsletter/2002/CSL_Connection_Mar02.pdf)>[accessed 26 May 2010].

challenged Foster's opinion that McCourt's life-writing has little literary merit by demonstrating that McCourt actually offers an often-disdainful review of the conflicting interpretations of Ireland's history and national image that have been re-packaged and airbrushed for global consumption and popular culture.<sup>5</sup> Because McCourt wrote at a time when 'Irishness' became a desirable commodity, I argued that he was able to justify the connection between his own life experience and the narrative of the nation, which paved the way for him to market his writing with international success. Demonstrating how McCourt's narrative has been re-worked, re-written and re-presented/presented in performance, has allowed me to construct a framework that has made visible the work of creation and intercession in McCourt's own texts. My research affirmed that the intertextuality within McCourt's work shapes the visual and aural interstices and projects the finite details and the communicative possibilities in his original text.

Chapter 2 began the process of uncovering the diverse ways in which McCourt's texts work to deconstruct ideas of 'Irishness' and generate meanings for his reader and audience. I established how he fine-tunes the classic Irish formula to construct a narrative of a miserable, Irish, Catholic childhood replete with clichés, sentimentality and wish fulfilment. Focus upon McCourt's references and allusions to music and to musical performance, allowed me to expose the complex struggle between his Irish and Irish-American identity that he purports to have endured. To achieve this, I appropriated Cleary's statement that McCourt undertakes an 'unqualified embrace of America as the land of opportunity', and demonstrated the allure of New York for

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Burning Embers, *Songs From The Ashes*, Phoenix Records, 2000, 8923203112.

*Songs From The Ashes*, Live cast recording by Uncontained Arts, Derby

<<http://www.ideastap.com/people/d0eac41d-b211-4b02-902e-9f2c01648203/standard-portfolio/e15b886c-60c1-44ef-90bf-9f300156a68d/>> [accessed 1 April 2013].

Kathy Haggerty, songs inspired by *Angela's Ashes*

<<http://www.faqs.org/copyright/opening-music-to-the-movie-genius-by-kathy-haggerty-last/>> [accessed 26 May 2010].

*Echoes of Ireland*, press release <<http://www.echoesofireland.com/media/Echoes-of-Ireland.pdf>> [accessed 26 October 2010].

Deborah Pardes, 'The Seventh Step', track 10, *Songs Inspired By Literature Chapter 1*, United Musicians, 10 September 2002, B000069B18.

<sup>5</sup> Foster, 'Selling Irish Childhoods: Frank McCourt and Gerry Adams', pp. 164-186.

McCourt, while revealing his struggle to reconcile an American birthright with his Irish childhood.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, my analysis bridged the critical gap that Cleary argues exists between Irish and American cultural interactions in light of the fact that the establishment of a 'major Irish emigrant community [...] undoubtedly had consequences for Irish cultural and literary development.'<sup>7</sup> The chapter exposed the complex contradictory narratives of representation involved when McCourt seeks to highlight his affinity with New York's Afro-Caribbean jazz culture. Textual evidence demonstrated how he sidesteps the issue of his whiteness and wealth by pointing instead to a somewhat questionable postcolonial Irish identification with the black migrant. Cleary's statement that New York City's allure, 'like that of the American Dream, depends on the idea that the United States represents the abolition of the 'Old World' scarcity and abundance beyond appetite', was applied to McCourt's writing to illuminate succinctly how, the 'American' cultural signifiers of optimism, emancipation, opportunity, redemption, universalism and multiculturalism become more pressing because Ireland embodies the signifiers, of poverty, loss and death for McCourt.<sup>8</sup>

The chapter moved on to investigate the idea of Irish and American cultural interaction, specifically through McCourt's connection with the Irish-American folk ensemble, The Clancy Brothers. Cleary's observation that The Clancys played a part in creating appreciative new audiences for 'Irish traditional and folk music' during the American folk revival of the 1960s permitted me to establish that in his writing McCourt uses the 'traditional' Irish music that he hears the group perform as a model for formulating the assimilation of immigrant communities in New York City.<sup>9</sup>

The next section of this chapter revealed how McCourt deploys a different set of musical tropes and performances to unite his life experience with particular ideas about the Irish historical experience. I evaluated how he utilises the comic articulation

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<sup>6</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 231.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

of the ridiculous Irish stereotype to formulate an unflattering account of his father's obsessive commitment to Irish nationalism. My investigation established how the particular songs that McCourt associates with his father serve as a commentary on what Merriman calls 'dystopic visions of an Ireland [populated by] gross caricatures' with no purchase on the experiences of today's audiences, their appeal to an emergent consumer-Irish consensus lies in their appearance as ludicrous manichaeian opposites – the colonized simian reborn.<sup>10</sup> I argued that Merriman's statement illuminates McCourt's self-conscious invocation of Thomas Nast's clichés and stereotypes to fashion the character of his father as an unstable, indolent and inebriate outsider. Textual evidence provided proof that McCourt's purpose is to shift the focus from the real to the representational by obfuscating consistently any overt political comment. He achieves this by appropriating a set of lyrics that relate to experiences that he scarcely knows first hand, but which he evokes to signify that even as a wealthy New York writer McCourt is in some way connected to a radical and/or revolutionary set of ideas. The chapter concluded with an analysis of the effect that the musical allusions and references to musical performances at work in McCourt's writing have upon his readership.

Chapter 3 extended and reshaped Cleary's contention that McCourt undertakes an 'unqualified embrace of America as the land of opportunity' to expose the extent to which McCourt employs cinematic references to define his idea of masculinity and his construction of a hyphenated ethnic identity.<sup>11</sup> The chapter analysed how the version of 'American' that resonates with such promise for McCourt in *Angela's Ashes* remains clichéd and idealistic to the degree that he has to reconcile the diverse elements of his persona from childhood onwards as the allure of 'America' becomes more pressing. Through textual evidence I made known how McCourt consciously constructs and then re-performs a new sense of identity that mediates between his Irish and American heritage; an intricate amalgamation that I argued McCourt undertakes to appeal to his

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<sup>10</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, p. 196.

<sup>11</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 231.

immense international audience. My scrutiny determined that McCourt deploys matinee heroes John Wayne, James Cagney and Fred Astaire, to utilise Hollywood's representations of the Western hero, the 'hoodlum' and the dancer as a cultural framework to describe and explore the vexed issue of Irish-American masculinities. The chapter established how McCourt exploits these cinematic "fantasy" figures to contrast the conservative and oppressive conditions of de Valera's Ireland with the perceived liberation that America offers, and to construct an idealised version of 'America' masculinity with which to substitute 'Irish' manhood. I tailored Greenblatt's notion of self-fashioning to authenticate how McCourt uses his childhood obsession with the cinema and these particular stars for the self-conscious fashioning of his own image, which he sets against ideological traits portraying masculinity. Textual examples confirmed that these three aforementioned stars contribute towards a critical understanding of what comprises a sexually powerful Irish-American male identity. This point was demonstrated further through the predominant trope in *'Tis* that charts McCourt's encounter between Irish masculinity and American femininity, which also attests to his gradually maturing outlook as the memoirs progress.

Throughout Chapter 4, I provided evidence of how the influences of the literary and performative predecessors Dion Boucicault and Seán O'Casey are significant to readings of McCourt, not only in terms of content and literary techniques but also because shared stylistic features serve as a form of global marketing for McCourt. In that regard, the chapter established that Ireland's economic boom provided the potential for McCourt to promote a tale of Irish poverty successfully. My analysis drew upon Merriman's contention that writers exploit themes that re-present the disenchanted and anti-Romantic qualities of 1930s/1940s; a perspective that revealed further the ways in which McCourt revitalises and reworks what Merriman calls 'reductive stereotypes of Irishness' that implicate audiences in particular negative stances toward the poor, the past and Irishness.<sup>12</sup> Textual examples confirmed that

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<sup>12</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, pp. 209, 196.

McCourt relies upon a set of melodramatic themes that derive from the realm of the Irish playhouse, because Boucicault and O'Casey provide characters that are in some way typical of those that permit McCourt to emulate certain stylistic features that appeal to his readership. As I contended, while McCourt's characters and dialogue echo that of the revisionist, yet provocative O'Casey, in terms of presenting a commercially successful and politically defanged work, McCourt's methodology brings him nearer to the rationale of Boucicault's original writing. Despite being chronologically more distanced, I proved that McCourt follows the way that Boucicault consciously allowed his plays to attract an international set of spectators in Ireland and the U.S.A., as well as in Britain, adapting his writing to suit a particular audience, yet firmly establishing the stock characters and standard themes associated with 'Irishness'. In turn, I revealed how McCourt appeals to his Irish and American audiences simultaneously by making self-referential use of his dual nationality. Yet, as I emphasised, McCourt's work has little political impact and actually follows Boucicault, rather than O'Casey in adopting a neutral stance towards poverty so that McCourt's audience is unlikely to engage in any wider societal critique. The chapter moved on to analyse the role of music as an audible sign of expressing the moral struggle between good and evil, and McCourt's awareness of its being an essential part of the aesthetic of melodrama's manipulation of the audience.

The final part of the chapter investigated McCourt's own acting and script-writing roles, revealing that he was a well-practiced performer who was acutely aware of the effective use of dramatic tropes. I argued that McCourt's immersion in performance and dramatic artistry proved that his literary success was not as unlikely as it first appeared with the publication of *Angela's Ashes* in 1996.<sup>13</sup> To that end, my research uncovered how McCourt's involvement with Irish theatre companies in New York that staged O'Casey's plays ensured that he absorbed easily the settings and themes that

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<sup>13</sup> See, The Associated Press, 'Frank McCourt, Irish Author of 'Angela's Ashes,' dies at 78', <[http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2009/07/frank\\_mccourt\\_irish\\_author\\_of.html](http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2009/07/frank_mccourt_irish_author_of.html)> [accessed 31 January 2014].

Cleary contends draw on domestic tragedy.<sup>14</sup> Hence, McCourt's conscious recycling of melodramatic themes permitted me to draw out obvious comparisons with the work of Boucicault and O'Casey.

Chapter 5 extended beyond the playhouse walls to examine the extent to which McCourt's writing relies upon a set of paradigms from Ireland's best-known writer, James Joyce. I argued that McCourt has been colonised by Joyce to the degree that he is unable to progress beyond the 'anxiety' of Joyce's aesthetic strategy, revealing how McCourt has to navigate a set of expectations about how a post-Joycean Irish writer should perform. The next part of the chapter ascertained that although McCourt's texts are often thought to be highly influenced by *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, there is an equally marked presence of Joycean ideas in McCourt's own public readings and actorly performances. Therefore, I assessed McCourt's role as an international literary celebrity and global entertainer in the 1990s, providing evidence that he performed something similar to the Joycean at some of these events and how these re-performances became central to McCourt's own public identity. I argued that while the unprecedented economic growth of Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' might be viewed as a sure sign of postcolonial success, McCourt's representation of the past through his appropriation of Joycean stylistics and conscious self-fashioning exemplifies Merriman's key point that without real cultural independence, Ireland's decolonisation remains a Utopia.<sup>15</sup>

The chapter then pointed to the way that Joyce has been commodified and mobilised by the late twentieth-century tourist industry, and I determined that McCourt was often dealing with such recent popular impressions of Joyce as much as with Joyce's own writing; the commodification of Joyce himself. I appropriated Cleary's concern with how commodification generates the replacement of economic value by cultural and aesthetic value to create a culture of copies where the emphasis is upon image

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<sup>14</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 235.

<sup>15</sup> Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, p. 10.



and style.<sup>16</sup> The chapter then exposed how McCourt's reliance upon an array of performance principles and Joycean stylistic strategies like allusion, ventriloquism, parody, homage, saturation, imitation, cliché, Irish stereotypes, intertextuality and mimicry, provide him with the means of a critique to engage, affirm or deconstruct 'Irishness'. Furthermore, Cleary's idea of pastiche was tailored to confirm that McCourt exemplifies writing that is fragmented by the intertextual reproduction of the aesthetic and textual forms of nostalgia formed by a recycling of the past.<sup>17</sup>

The thesis has uncovered McCourt's compositional strategies, focused on the performative allusions in his work and emphasised his public performances. My research has also exposed the breadth of both reader and spectator response to McCourt's work, and to *Angela's Ashes* in particular. I have revealed the impact of McCourt's self-construction on his audience/readership in terms of its relationship to ideas of 'Irishness', concluding that the purpose of his cultural representation of Ireland's enervating past (in terms of disabling poverty and resolute and repressive Church and State politics) is not only to create an 'Irish' version of life-writing but also to educate a contemporary audience about their good fortune in experiencing what Cleary calls a "'lucky escape" from all that earlier business.<sup>18</sup> I have argued that McCourt's audiences are 'compelled' by the various ways that he uses the past to formulate debates about identity and nation that, according to Cleary, have become increasingly relevant to 'the historical analysis of culture' from the time of publication in the mid-1990s at the start of the 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom; a period that Merriman defines as a 'moment of exceptional interest in the development of Independent Ireland.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, pp. 79-81.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

Also see, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Harlow: Pearson-Longman, 2004), p. 254.

<sup>18</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 211.

Also see, Cleary, 'Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture', p.108.

<sup>19</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 77.  
Merriman, *Because We Are Poor*, p. 1.

Yet, as the thesis has affirmed, rather than confining themselves to the reading of McCourt's first memoir, his supporters have 'consumed' the musical and cinematic adaptations of *Angela's Ashes*, undertaken Limerick's tourist trail, visited the Frank McCourt Museum and experienced McCourt's own stage productions. Hence, the thesis has established that McCourt's construction of 'Irishness' acts as a global 'brand', while his fluid Irish-American identity elicits a response from those consuming the texts and from those represented in his writing. Moreover, McCourt's exploitation of predictable themes and stereotypical characters permits the reader to make connections between their own life and that of McCourt, demonstrating Roy Foster's description of *Angela's Ashes* as a 'cult-former'.<sup>20</sup> Here Foster is acknowledging that the emergence of McCourt's memoir during the unparalleled economic boom of the 'Celtic Tiger' era emphasised the static economy and hopeless conditions described by McCourt in the text. Thus, *Angela's Ashes* has become representative of both eras and stands as an exemplarily 'Irish' memoir. Indeed, as Claire Lynch has characterised it, McCourt has been able to profit, 'not only from one historical moment, but two, as both the periods of setting and time of publication captured the public imagination'.<sup>21</sup> In Lynch's terms the economic, social and cultural changes that occurred during the 'Celtic Tiger' era had a profound effect upon life-writing, enabling McCourt to re-present through performance, the 'miserable' childhood inflicted upon him Church and State.

The research findings have verified that by looking back to the past, McCourt's work typifies how life-writing can act as a catalyst for change by providing a forum for dissent, thereby providing a framework for resistance in the present. Cleary's argument that McCourt's purpose in *Angela's Ashes* is to 'transport us back into a world whose texture and temporality is not our own' in order to 'exorcise de Valera's Ireland without pretence of balance or regret' has allowed me to prove that by conveying the reader to the older sensorial world that has supposedly been lost,

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<sup>20</sup> Roy F. Foster, 'Selling Irish Childhoods: Frank McCourt and Gerry Adams', p. 165.

<sup>21</sup> Claire Lynch, *Irish Autobiography Stories of Self in the Narrative Of A Nation* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 147.

McCourt's apparent resistance to the modern world actually allows his audience to have simultaneous immersion in the old de Valerian Ireland and the new 'Celtic Tiger' era.<sup>22</sup> While this reasoning resonates with Lynch's contention, I have argued that McCourt strived for an innovative and individual approach to life-writing, and my analysis of his performative model has made known the system of connections and influences upon his work and the ways in which Boucicault, O'Casey and Joyce provided a template for McCourt to re-enact his own experiences. Despite the influence of these literary forebears, I have argued that McCourt's perspective has had an equal influence upon what Harte has called the subsequent 'copy-cat texts'.<sup>23</sup> While this subject is beyond the scope of my thesis it, nonetheless, opens up an avenue for further research.

It is now, of course, possible to historicise the era in which McCourt's writing brought him international fame and great popular success. This period came before the arrival of e-books and during a time that now looks increasingly remote and alien to us. Yet, as the thesis has emphasised, McCourt's work is, itself, insistent in pointing back to the cultural referents of an even earlier era, which Cleary argues is 'repeatedly evoked because it serves as the definitive image of the anti-modern which a modernizing Ireland needed both to define itself against and to transcend.' Moreover, when examining the process whereby the past becomes classified by the terms in which it is defined in the present, Cleary explains that as the 'distance between the present and that past widens, the social ills that obsess these works — clerical dogmatism, domestic tyranny and oppression, sexual repression, poverty of opportunity or whatever — will themselves increasingly come to be identified with the past, with a particular time and not with a social system that subtends both past and present.'<sup>24</sup> By reshaping and deploying Cleary and Merriman's ideas of postcolonial performance to authenticate my own arguments, I have exposed the myriad of ways that McCourt's

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<sup>22</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, pp. 230-231.

<sup>23</sup> Harte, 'Introduction: Autobiography and the Irish Cultural Moment', in *Modern Irish Autobiography*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Cleary, 'Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture', pp. 114, 115.

work engages with the 'Celtic Tiger' era's most central debates about identity, belonging, and nationhood. Ultimately, my work has provided a more developed sense of McCourt's distinctive methodology and championed his contribution to Irish life-writing. Indeed, the thesis has challenged the opinions of his detractors by demonstrating the ways in which McCourt stages Ireland as 'Other' for the purpose of constructing a personal identity alongside a subjective version of Irish history. And if McCourt's life-writing does continue to be read and re-performed in the future, it may be at least partly because these deliberations have a continued purchase.

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## **PERSONAL CONVERSATIONS**

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