

## Discourse Analysis of Frank McCourt's *Teacher Man* Through a Feminist Educational Lens

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study used critical discourse analysis to highlight how educational stakeholders can examine discourses and react to power in texts using a feminist lens to problematize identity.

*Teacher Man* (Mccourt, 2005) is an inspiring text used to help education students learn more about the daily challenges of teaching (Mottart, Vanhooren, & Rutten, 2009). Feminists argue that many of the texts in school have to be analyzed to see how they promote gender inequality (Dillabough, 1999). A text like *Teacher Man* has to be examined through a feminist lens to see how it affects power relations between men and women in education.

Educators must be aware of how their language and culture can empower their students or disempower them (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Educators must inspire students to be politically active citizens who can question narratives and discourses. Educators and other cultural workers must be public intellectuals outside the classroom too (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). Educators are subject to various discourses that can disempower and empower people. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) helps educators understand how language can effect power relations (Rodgers, 2004). Text and talk can help enact and produce power abuses, inequalities, and distorted socially constructed identities (van Dijk, 2001). CDA has been used to examine classroom talk (Rodgers, 2004) and debates between politicians (van Dijk, 2001). Narratives promote learning, but educators must be politically savvy about their presentation (Itkonen, 2009). CDA improves the learning advocacy of teachers (Rogers, 2004). Discourses are defined in relation to other discourses and can be contradictory (Gee, 2004). However teachers are unaware of how and why the discursive elements of language can enact and support power relations that can counter their advocacy work (Rodgers, 2004). Frank McCourt's (2005) memoir *Teacher Man* explores his identity as a man and a teacher. Gender narratives, identities, and constructions affect everyone in the gender spectrum through the structured inequalities they support if they are not problematized and explored (Butler, 1990). Left unchallenged, discourses in *Teacher Man* can do more harm than good. The purpose of this study to add to the literature on CDA, feminism, and education by exploring *Teacher Man* through a feminist education lens. These research questions are explored: What can be learned using critical discourse analysis of *Teacher Man* to explore power relations in education through a feminist lens? How can feminist educators use this text to help all students?

This study is important because texts like *Teacher Man* are affecting the lives of future teachers and their students. This study uses CDA to examine the text of *Teacher Man* and how it could be used by feminist scholars to help all students. First, a conceptual framework incorporating CDA, power, feminism, and memoir writing is discussed. Then the methodology, results, findings, implications, and conclusions of the case study are discussed.

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### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical discourse analysis “is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). CDA is a theory and a method. CDA differs from other discourse analysis methods because its scope goes beyond describing and interpreting a discourse to attempting to argue how and why they work (Rodgers, 2004). Discourse is distinctive ways of using language (e.g., verbal) in combination with using other ways of interacting, knowing, thinking, and communication in order to enact a socially situated identity. This form of discourse is often written with a capital “D” in order to differentiate it from a more simple use of language (discourse with a lower case “d”). Discourses are defined in relationship to other Discourses (Gee, 2004). CDA is used in addressing social problems. Discourse is a social action, historical, and performs ideological work. There is a mediated link between text and society. Society and culture is constituted by discourse. Power relations are seen to be discursive and discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Context can also affect discourses (Fairclough, 1995). In a classroom, an educator, for example, may act, perceive, and speak in a way that makes it clear they are the teacher in relation to the students who may act, perceive, and speak in a different way.

### **Power**

Power manifests itself in various ways in the language of educational institutions and their support of and influence over the biopolitical outcomes of students as they proceed through their social lives (Foucault, 1979). Language can support hegemonic structures that hinder democracy. Public intellectuals must help the masses resist it (Gramsci, Hoare, & Nowell-Smith, 1971). For example, narratives in the press can help manufacture consent (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Teachers can also maintain power relations through curriculum and pedagogy with languages and codes that oppress students (Freire, 1970). Teachers can fight power with language and discourse in the classroom and outside the classroom to help liberate students (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). Power is manifested in the elements of discourses. Through their expression, they display power relations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Educators face real and manufactured crises in speaking truth to power however (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). In many discourses, power is control through inequality, social power abuse, and dominance (van Dijk, 2001).

### **Feminism at the University**

Gender notions must be problematized to understand how identities are constructed and how inequalities are structured (Butler, 1990). Feminist critique can expose gendered constructions of the modern teacher as favoring male dominance. Rationalist and instrumentalist views of teacher professionalism suggest that teachers are actors that sublimate their personal views and autonomy to the will of the state for the sake of the economy and society by following standards passed down to them. The teacher is said to be professionalized even though they are being deskilled and devalued. They are devalued because their own wisdom or judgment is put aside to follow what the state has mandated. The improvement of their skills is not promoted. They are asked not to create or inform a curriculum but to relate what the state deems important through standards and curriculum created outside the classroom. Teachers are not valuable in themselves but only as instruments of the state (Dillabough, 1999).

Rationality and instrumentality have always gone against women. The feminine has always been symbolically constructed as the irrational. Instrumentality may suggest that

individuals gain equality when they submit to the state, but this ignores the fact that gender has been constructed socially and that many factors still keep women from being equal to men. Teacher authority is not constructed through relationships with students and the creation of knowledge but to adherence to assessment methods and standards of professionalism created by so called experts outside the classroom that tend to take a masculine perspective. Those that differ from that perspective risk being identified as incompetent. Women cannot have their own knowledge if it differs from these notions (Dillabough, 1999).

Particularly troubling is the construction of women as caregivers, guardians, and somehow part of a private sphere. Female teachers become overworked especially when these constructions meet with the rational and instrumentalist discourse. Unless they delineate what they are responsible for, these teachers can become scapegoats blamed for failing to meet unfair expectations. Figuring out a feminist position in the world of instrumentality and rationality becomes a matter of survival (Dillabough, 1999). Reassessing the public and private divide, the roles of men and women in them, educational opportunities, and gendered constructions of citizenship are part of the modern feminist mission (Arnot, 1997).

### **Memoirs**

Memoirs use complex and unusual perspectives and refer to other lives beyond that of the writer (Caws, 2007). Memoir, autobiography, biography, and lifewriting are controversial in academia. A memoir can be as thrilling and suspenseful as the reader wonders how the life of the writer will turn out. Readers learn about themselves by reading about others (Miller, 2000). Memoir and life writing can enter into philosophical dimensions. A passion for the self leads to writing of the self and comparing that written self to the historical nature of the self. There is in essence a remembrance of the self through the writing about the self (Kronick, 2000).

Autobiographical works can be considered distinctive genres (Machann, 1994) and develop in many forms. The nature of truth is complex. The study of autobiographies is gaining prominence in academia. Postmodern and feminist stances on autobiography are flourishing. Making the private public is part of a feminist vision (Miller, 2007). Narratives, from autobiographies, journals, or memoirs, are one way women are able to create knowledge that has been ignored or made invisible before by larger structural inequalities (Henry, 1995).

Emerging teacher narrative literatures highlight culture and power relations. When these narratives are used in the classroom, there must be a sense of the related activities and functions they inspire. The retelling and development of a narrative can emphasize certain themes. Discourses, master narratives, and cultural norms inform the stories people tell and how they are valued and understood. Discourses can frame stories that restrain people. Only through reinterpretation via other perspectives can learning, awareness, and liberation be unleashed (McVee, 2004).

In the past, for example, autobiographers deliberately forgot certain things as part of structural concerns. The authority of a male writer is limited and conditional. Autobiographies create an identity for males defined in relation to how they treat women (Broughton, 1999). Recent language acquisition memoirs paint men as heroic figures with women downplaying their achievements and agency. Many narratives suggest that men make things happen and things just happen to women (Pavlenko, 2001).

### ***Teacher Man***

*Teacher Man* is Frank McCourt's (2005) memoir of his days as a public school teacher before his success as an author. McCourt discusses the everyday challenges of teaching while unsuccessfully pursuing a dissertation, working several jobs, and facing relationship problems.

In essence, it is how he developed as a man and as a teacher (McCourt, 2005). *Teacher Man* describes the disposition of a teacher who must show up and teach several classes a day to students who do not care what challenges that teacher is facing in or outside of the classroom (Ginsberg & Whaley, 2006). McCourt continuously questions whether he feels validated by his choices. The teaching career is discussed as both a distraction to his career as a writer and an important foundation for it (Amato, 2006). McCourt uses entertaining stories about himself as material in the classroom to hide the required education the students resist (Cohen, 2006). Narratives like the *Teacher Man* are used to help education students reflect on what they would do in key moments in the classroom by providing imaginative engagement, points of critical reflection, and inspiration for empathy not present in regular textbooks (Mottart, Vanhooren, & Rutten, 2009). *Teacher Man* is lauded for portraying the human failings of a teacher, giving creative solutions to teaching problems, highlighting problems within a school, and exploring how the teacher was affected by his students and vice versa. Sections of the narrative that dealt with his life outside the classroom are seen as unnecessary by some (Carlson, 2006). However *Teacher Man* is part of a recent trend in autobiographical material that highlights the success of male teachers in certain historical circumstances in contrast to works by underprivileged women who find success in less predictable ways (Austenfield, 2009).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Rationalist and instrumentalist conceptions that downplay the skills and wisdom of women as professionals and teachers are part of a system that supports patriarchy and the state (Dillabough, 1999). Power is a kind of social control promoted through discourses that support abuse, dominance, and inequality (van Dijk, 2001). Discourses in recent teaching memoirs can help support these inequalities (Austenfield, 2009). This study takes the perspective that discourse examination of texts reveals gender and power constructions that promote inequality. CDA can be used to explore the discourses in a teaching memoir and expose how power is abused and supported by these discourses and how we can look to address the larger issues that support these problems and affect everyone.

### **Methods**

This is a case study of a written text using reading, notes, and journal taking to reflect on how the text could be viewed through a feminist lens and how it could have implications for educators. The text is the memoir *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt (2005).

### **Data Collection**

The researcher read the text and used content analysis via note taking and reflective journals. The researcher was arguably analyzing as he gathered notes. The researcher would read a page and then take notes and then continue the process again. The notes would be discourses that were found. After a chapter, the researcher would revise notes and begin journal writing about the discourses and how they relate to power and a feminist educational lens. The researcher would then reread or revise notes as deemed necessary. The process was continued for the entire book.

### **Data Analysis**

The units of analysis are the basic points the author made through words, sentences, implied and unspoken assumptions and ideas, and sentence fragments that add up to a discourse or to discourses. The data is grouped into different discourses. The researcher used critical discourse analysis to see how aspects of language express power through a feminist lens. The notes and journal writing segments were organized according to how they expressed power and could affect feminism directly or indirectly. Particularly noted were moments where power was

expressed as coercion, control, inequality, and abuse and where women were judged in terms of instrumentality and rationality in respect to supporting patriarchy (often represented through McCourt). The discourses were titled, described, and examples were noted. These research questions were explored in the study by developing themes from the note taking and journal writing: What can be learned using critical discourse analysis of *Teacher Man* to explore power relations in education through a feminist lens? How can feminist educators use this text to help all students?

### **Results, Findings, and Discussion**

These are two samples of the many discourses observed and analyzed from the text. The title of the first discourse is the pursuit of education. It can be described as instances where McCourt seeks a higher form of education. Examples of this discourse include moments in the memoir when McCourt pursues a dissertation outside the United States, attempts to teach at the postsecondary level, and leaves doctoral work to gain his teaching credentials. The title of another discourse is the pursuit of writing. It can be described as instances where McCourt seeks to be a serious author. Examples include moments in the memoir when McCourt views teaching as a distraction from writing, idolizes his literary heroes, and begins to see himself as superior to a published author he meets.

What can be learned using critical discourse analysis of *Teacher Man* to explore power relations in education through a feminist lens is that this construction of a male teacher comes at the expense of women. Pursuing knowledge, idealization, and the corruption of education are major themes of power found in the many discourses observed. The pursuit of knowledge for McCourt seems based on the idea that the males have knowledge that is recognizably valuable, masculine, and heterosexual. For example, McCourt as a novice author meets a published writer who could help him but McCourt sees him as a romantic rival and destroys the relationship. McCourt questions his skills as a teacher, seeks improvement, frets over being fired by male administrators, and decides that his best teaching occurs spontaneously. His wife, a continuously employed and successful teacher, is ignored and rendered invisible as a potential resource for learning how to improve. McCourt's spontaneous teaching style seems to devalue her methodical approach as if she should be following a male created curriculum, but it is radical that he teaches with the more feminine idea of spontaneously using recipes. Pursuing a meaningful dissertation as a source of powerful knowledge for McCourt means idolizing male writers while having meaningless affairs with women. If the affairs are meaningless, then they should go unmentioned unless they exist to enforce his masculine image. Idealization is another major theme. The ideal woman in McCourt's view often plays a madonna, trophy, or innocent child role. Men ideally play heroes and martyrs. For example, McCourt is the heroic teacher that reaches a troubled student who dies a martyr in Vietnam. The madonna mother figure idolizes her fallen son and the teacher he worshipped in a trinity that seems to play into religious and artistic overtones. McCourt muses about women, glory, and money as rewards for being a successful writer or a teacher. The successful man is rewarded with objectified women as commodities. McCourt's daughter plays an innocent child role that seems to purify a bad marriage. Real heroes and villains in McCourt's life are aggressive men. The heroic male McCourt fights male guidance counselors and principals. Female teachers do not decide the fate of students.

The corruption of education theme plays out in anecdotes where women who are seen as bad affect the way McCourt perceives his educational role. McCourt's former lover plays the role of Eve by revealing the forbidden knowledge of how education really works in multiple

educational contexts. She betrays McCourt and years later, she is dead. The death almost seems like she is being punished for knowing too much. McCourt's literary genre use is biased. A doomed multicultural relationship between students is set up as a parallel to the story of Romeo and Juliet. However only the girl is hurt because she is rejected by the boyfriend. Thus the female is punished for crossing cultural lines. Another moment reveals how McCourt's anger at his wife is projected into violence against a male student. McCourt juxtaposes a scene of a bad morning with his wife with a later moment where he slaps a male student for behaving badly. McCourt claims he does not know why he reacted like he did. No connection is made between the scene with the wife and the slap of the student. This is disingenuous for a skilled writer who put scenes together for a reason and because through out the book, he is sensitive about himself. McCourt possibly slaps the child because he can not slap his wife or because he is symbolically slapping a weaker form of his self that has been bothered by women. The final corruption of education is the larger arc of the book. A feminine, passive, and often irrational education career is a prologue to the agency, activity, and power McCourt gains moving from educator/ teacher to writer/man.

How can feminist educators use this text to help all students is by analyzing the text not just at face value or through the prism of patriarchal heteronormativity but through the entire spectrum of gender, race, and culture in order to gain larger truths via reflection based pedagogy. McCourt can be seen as an agent of patriarchy. This kind of teaching memoir can be seen as an instrument that helps promote patriarchy. In this case, this memoir was explored through a certain kind of feminist lens. It is necessary to allow students to look at it through various lenses including race, gender, and culture. Feminist educators should also address the larger problems that make these discourses possible. A memoir market and literary culture for example supports the genre of McCourt's work. This can be emblematic of larger economic structures that divide people. Through journal writing and discussion feminist educators can have students reflect on scenes and discourses in texts like these and the larger problems they symbolize. The voices of a class can counter that of the individual as agent of patriarchy or that of the state. Through discussion groups of people that patriarchy silences can find a voice and work together to create new forms of knowledge, discourses and forms of activism that fight power abuses and promote equality.

This analysis also can make an educator who acts in an instrumentalist and rational fashion realize that by teaching with this text as part of a patriarchal curriculum, they are helping to impose the power that devalues them. Specifically, the feminist educator can look at the way the women in McCourt's memoir are ignored, devalued, or seen as irrational when they are not supporting him. Images of women that McCourt choose to highlight can be problematized. Feminist educator may even have exercises where students write the counter story to what McCourt describes. It would also be a mistake to simply support the creation of a teacher woman memoir to counter the teacher man memoir. Alone it would be playing into a construction that is already against designed against women and men since their identities are more complex than those categories of sex and profession suggest. More importantly, feminist educators can not limit feminism or feminist education to feminists or the feminine since inequality for one group is often inequality for all. It would also be a mistake to paint the McCourt memoir as a success for the agents of patriarchy. McCourt's construction of his identity as a man and a teacher may have given him some success both in and out of the classroom under patriarchy, but it also limited what he saw in himself and what he could have been as well as his relationship to those

around him. An unreflective acceptance of the discourses in this text could do the same for someone following in his footsteps in and out of the classroom.

### **Implications, Limitations, and Conclusions**

An implication for future research is the need to explore other gender perspectives in texts like these. Limitations and delimitations include observer bias and the study's scope. In conclusion, this is one example of research which offers one perspective on how educators can learn about power through discourses. Further studies may need to look at discourses that appear in a less literary and traditional way because students now have other resources they can learn from. This study is important because texts like *Teacher Man* are used in teacher education and other college programs. What students learn or do not learn from these text can influence what they teach others and affect society as a whole. In conclusion, this study shows that a lot can be learned about power relations in education by using a critical discourse analysis of *Teacher Man* through a feminist lens. Feminist educators can use this text to help all students in many ways.

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