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Character education in real time scenario: A trait study of Frank McCourt's memoir *Teacher Man*

Abstract

Literature is the mirror of life is saying need not to be introspected. The study of character studies has deep connections with literature studies. Literature's connections with the social, moral substrates in education and psychology have to be re-established. Literature alone gives us the space to introspect in private space the ramifications of both the private and the public and to take a replenished self to the world. A memoir is a life narrative that historically situates the subject in a social environment, as either observer or participant. It is easier to learn from real life characters of their experience than from fictional characters. This study depicts the real time situations faced by McCourt in high school experiences.

Keywords: Life Writing, Memoir, Empathy, Traits, Character studies and Character development

The memoir is such a genre where the narrator encapsulates the social, cultural and political events of his time and we get the picture through his experiences selected

to be included in the narrative. The postmodernist programme, especially deconstruction, did manage to make character based humanistic interpretation of novels an anathema, an intellectual sin to be shunned at all costs.

Frank McCourt (1930-2009) is an Irish-American teacher turned writer. McCourt has received coveted Pulitzer Prize for his memoir *Angela's Ashes*. Born in Ireland, under severe financial crunch situations, his parents found it tough to raise their children. His father moved to Limerick to find work in the factories where McCourt joined him at the age of eleven. At the age of nineteen he moved to New York to look after himself and his family with the money saved by working in the post office. He worked in New York University on probation for a year and completed a degree in English. *Angela's Ashes* (1996) won him the annual *Pulitzer Prize for Biography and Autobiography* and sold successfully to make him a millionaire. This work was followed by *'Tis* (1999) and *Teacher Man* (2005). McCourt was a member of National Arts Club, and recipient of Award of Excellence from the 'The International Center.'

Teaching character through literature is the need of the hour because the civil society now faces a litany of alarms—"increased violence, evidence by brutal hazing, chronic depression, and growing incidences of suicide" (Miller 15). The pattern of these behaviors calls for immediate steps to revive character building education. The idea of personality traits is as old as human language. Traits are the descriptors that aid in characterizing someone's personality. Aristotle (384-322 BC), in his *Ethics*, uses terms such as vanity, modesty and cowardice as key determinants of moral and immoral behavior. Theophrastus (371-287 BC) in his book describes thirty 'characters' or personality types which his translators feel should be named 'traits' instead. The idea of personality traits proper begins with Allport and Odbert (1936) who after extensive survey identified 18,000 English personality relevant terms that go to describe

character. Even nouns, sentences and actions can have personality connotations. There are two major assumptions regarding traits i) it is stable over time and ii) it is generally believed that traits influence behaviour. Allport adopted a method of inferring traits by four categories.

- Neutral terms designating personal traits (e.g., ‘artistic,’ ‘assertive’)
- Terms primarily descriptive of temporary moods or activities (e.g., ‘alarmed’ ‘ashamed’)
- Terms conveying social and characterial judgments of personal conducts or designating influence on others (e.g., ‘adorable’ , ‘asinine’)
- Miscellaneous: Designation of physique, capacities and developmental condition (e.g., ‘alone’ ‘Anglican’)

Inferring traits from behaviour is done by analyzing an individual based on how he interacts with another. It is made in natural circumstances.

Teacher Man by Frank McCourt is a stunning depiction of the experiences of a sensitive human being and a teacher who really wanted to make a difference to the young students who studied under him. There are not many memoirs written by school teachers. What the teacher feels today has not been so poignantly captured as McCourt has done in his book. Completely free from any academic, intellectual pretensions the memoir is an honest, forthright account written in a style dominated by self deprecation. The memoir also gives an idea regarding where education stands in the present context and what status the teacher enjoys in the society, a condition best expressed by the author in the Prologue to *Teacher Man*.

When I taught in New York City high schools for thirty years no one but my students paid me a scrap of attention..... I hoped it might sell a few

hundred copies and I might be invited to have discussions with book clubs.

The book was my second act (2-3).

Teacher Man the non human presence is captured in the method-driven, within-the-box teaching done by most. Teachers caught in that mode do not consider students as individuals to be grown but miscreants to be mistrusted and controlled. The memoir by McCourt graphically presents this situation prevailing in the educational system.

The inspiring English teacher then fades into gray shadows to eke out her days on a penny-pinching pension, dreaming of the one child she might have reached. Dream on, teacher. You will not be celebrated (4-5).

The teacher seems to spend all his/her time in life in the sidelines. Reward and recognition are not tangible as is the teachers' output and productivity. In such a profession, a high self esteem is what can make it meaningful and productive and carry a teacher through his/her career. The quantifying madness that is the hallmark of consumerist societies tends to force teachers to become soulless.

The purpose of reading literature is to develop appreciation and critical thinking skills. The recipe concert session is followed by feedback time during which constructive criticism is not wanting. The news has spread and students of other classes are curious too. But McCourt becomes apprehensive.

Thinking of those other English teachers and the solid stuff makes me uneasy again. They're following the curriculum, preparing the kids for higher education and the great world beyond. We're not here to enjoy ourselves teacher man (213).

But the exercise has had its effect. Reflecting on what one has done and what others have done has opened up the introspective space in the students. They have learnt to criticize in order to improve and also to be receptive. The critical faculty made aware in themselves

by the recipe rap can now be applied to other domains. What they did with recipes was to have experiences and in the process they have learn

To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only to consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all (43).

Sentimental, idealistic and adventurous McCourt is in this incidence. But it is not foolhardiness or thoughtless adventurism. His is well prepared and the unexpected reaction comes to have desired effects. The reflective side of the writer, though present, does not readily strike us as the self deprecatory humour distracts us. But a careful reading will make clear the amount of thinking that goes into his decisions and actions.

The whole memoir, as we have seen, revolves around the concept of empathy. McCourt starts his career with stories of his life the purpose probably being earning the listening of the students. Initial objections apart, he succeeds and the stories get to be demanded. He builds his entire pedagogy around empathy. McCourt makes writing an organic activity. He is also indirectly suggesting here how we make a natural activity an excruciatingly a laborious one. Curriculum should make writing an enjoyable activity. It might help as it does in the students writing excuse notes so much so the one written to Judas earns praise for McCourt. The traits seen in McCourt Teacher Man are self deprecatory humour, frankness, honesty, proactiveness, adventurism, innovativeness, empathy, insightfulness, inferential acumen, absence of defensiveness, self pity but an honest admission of it, emotional intelligence.

The study reveals that character studies can be fruitful in understanding human nature and social behaviour. They also help identify positive and negative traits and to realise which traits are to be developed and which traits are to be omitted. The study sheds light on the personality of three characters who stand apart from others by the possession of some rare traits or by the combination of such rare traits. The columnist David Brooks has been consistently quoted throughout the study. This has been necessitated as he devotes most of his columns to moral and ethical development. Moreover he frequently refers to and does mini reviews of books that advocate character study and character development.

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