

Irish Stereotypes as Seen Through the Irish Lens

The appearance and discussion of stereotypes in Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*

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February 2025

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Number of pages: 22 pages.

Abstract: In my paper I study Frank McCourt's childhood memoir *Angela's Ashes* (1996) from the perspective of two stereotypes commonly connected to Irish people: drunkenness and a propensity for violence. My aim is to analyse these stereotypes from the Irish lens, to see how an Irish author such as McCourt discusses the nature and prevalence of these stereotypes. In my research I use Pramod K. Nayar's *The Post-Colonial Studies Dictionary* (2015) as a source for my definition of the term stereotype.

I split my research into two main sections: a section for studying drunkenness and a section for the prevalence of violence. Each section I further split into three subsections: one for introducing the stereotype and its historical origins, one for findings of the stereotype in the book, and one for further analysis on what McCourt intends to say about the stereotype.

In my conclusion I state that although McCourt does not outright deny the existence of these stereotypical features in the Irish society of his childhood, he provides a detailed description of how and why these features exist. He connects other factors of his childhood like poverty and religion to these stereotypes and does not reduce any character to a mere stereotype. I also add that my research provokes further interest for additional research on the topic of Irish stereotypes through the Irish lens as well as further readings of McCourt's memoir through the perspective of other Irish stereotypes.

Key words: stereotypes, Irish, alcohol, violence

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1 Introduction

In a 1997 interview on his Pulitzer-winning 1996 memoir *Angela's Ashes*, author Frank McCourt remarks on his time as a high school teacher in New York. He cites that upon learning of his Irish heritage, his students were “a bit disappointed [Mccourt] didn't adhere to the stereotype [of the Irish liking to drink alcohol]” (*Frank McCourt Interview on “Angela's Ashes” (1997)*, 2016). Here McCourt illustrates a common example of a negative stereotype held over Irish people.

In my paper I study *Angela's Ashes* and analyse how McCourt writes and discusses Irish stereotypes in his work. I acknowledge my third-party perspective on the history of Ireland, its colonisation and oppression by the British and the struggles that followed, as well as the importance of these topics being discussed by Irish voices. It is precisely due to this that in my paper I aim to contribute to this discussion by amplifying the voice of an Irish author in an Irish work of literature discussing Irish stereotypes.

My chosen research method is to take two common Irish stereotypes and analyse *Angela's Ashes* through the perspective of both. The stereotypes I use are the propensity for drunkenness and violence. I analyse both stereotypes in independent sections, which are both further divided into three respective subsections. The subsections are divided in the following manner: one for introducing the stereotype, one for findings of the stereotype in McCourt's book and one for analysis.

In my paper, I use Pramod K. Nayar's definition of stereotyping as “the depiction of a set of characteristics that are then taken as the ‘essential’ features of an entire group or community” (2015, 140). Nayar further connects this term to colonialism and colonial writings, emphasising European colonialism on non-European colonies. I argue that, despite being European, this definition can be applied to the Irish, who have been subject to stereotyping from as early on as the 11th century. After the 1066 Norman Conquest of England the Anglo-Norman invaders were compelled to continue expanding their rule further to Wales, Scotland and Ireland. These expansionist military attempts were accompanied by colonial writings that reduced the Irish, Welsh and Scottish as “peoples of low moral, legal and social standards in comparison to those who wielded power at the Anglo-Norman court” (Jaworska-Biskup 2018, 114). Essentially, the Irish fell victim to stereotyping to justify colonial expansion and Anglo-Norman dominance over the Irish.

Hundreds of years later offensive caricatures of the Irish could be found in British news outlets in leading articles, editorial cartoons, letters to the editor as well as in performing

art in a phenomenon referred to as “Stage Irish” (Szczeszak-Brewer 2020, 27). This term would eventually extend to mean stock Irish characters across all fiction. Although “Stage Irish” characters were mostly found in publications by the colonial press or individuals who sympathised with the British, my interest is in whether these long-developed Irish stereotypes can be found in a work written by an Irish author. If so, how does said author interact with these stereotypes? Do they enforce or combat these stereotypes? These are the questions integral to my thesis.

2 'The Drunken Irish'

2.1 The origins of drunkenness as a stereotype

Near the end of McCourt's memoir Frank is working at the telegram office, where he encounters Mr. Harrington, an Englishman grieving the death of his Irish wife. It is during this encounter that Mr. Harrington, likely drunk himself, says: "You'll need a drink of course. You Irish quaff at every turn. Barely weaned before you clamor for the whiskey bottle, the pint of stout" (Mccourt [1996] 1997, 383). He continues: "You people love your alcohol. Helps you crawl and whine better" (384). Mr. Harrington appears to be a staunch believer in the Irish stereotype of drunkenness, stereotyping and berating Frank and pressuring him into drinking.

The origins of the stereotype of Irish drunkenness may date back as far as 2000 years, with the ancient Greek philosopher Plato for example being cited as describing the Celtic people as 'drunken and combative' (Mauger 2021, 71). A more weaponised version of this stereotype, however, came about around the 16th century as a tool for British colonisation (71). Michael de Nie writes that the British saw the Irish as the anti-thesis to the virtues of the Brit. According to British colonists, the Irish were "superstitious, feckless, improvident, duplicitous, violent, excitable, subservient to priests and demagogues, and given to drink" (de Nie 2004, 23). This led to further deductions of the Irish being "half-civilized, unstable, and unprepared to govern their own affairs" (ibid.), a fate shared by many of the other victims of British colonisation (ibid.). In fiction these views manifested in the form of 'Stage Irish' characters, including in its sphere somewhat differing depictions of men and women. Particularly with the so-called 'Stage Irishwoman', these portrayals were often met with outrage (Kibler 2005, 8).

During the 19th and 20th centuries Irish drinking stereotypes were fought against by Irish nationalists and later the Irish government by popular temperance movements and restrictive legislation (Mauger 2021, 72). Supporters of the temperance movements believed that by shifting the global perception of the Irish, Irish freedom could be achieved. Another 20th century contribution to the conversation around Irish drinking was the increased interest of medical commentators around the topic. This conversation, however, seemed often to be centred around the prevalent stereotypes around Irish drinking and the enforcing of them through questionably conducted research. An example of this is when Harvard University sociologist Robert F. Bales blindly accepted the stereotypes of Irish drinking as a premise for

his own research, despite contrasting statistical evidence already existing (74). Additionally, up until contrasting research was conducted after 1910, there was a popular, rather ableist, notion that the Irish were ‘defective’ due to their proclivity to drink, which was further used to undermine Irishness and Irish identity (74).

2.2 Drinking in *Angela’s Ashes*

Drunkenness, alcoholism and alcohol itself are all major themes in *Angela’s Ashes*. McCourt depicts many occasions where his family’s living conditions are impacted by his father’s alcoholism. He also writes of the many different purposes alcohol serves in the society of Limerick in the 1930s; be it to help mourn the loss of a child or relax after work, to cope with the misery of poverty or celebrate a big occasion. The memoir itself begins with something of a hyperbolic admission of Irish drunkenness: “People brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father [...]” (McCourt [1996] 1997, 1). In this section of my paper I analyse drinking in *Angela’s Ashes* through different characters and how McCourt chooses to describe them.

2.2.1 Malachy Snr – The Drunken Irishman of Limerick

McCourt’s admission serves as an adequate introduction to the most prominent character he uses to discuss the topic of drinking in his memoir: his father Malachy McCourt Snr. In the beginning of the novel McCourt gives a summary of his father’s life before meeting his mother as well as a summary of the last years of his life. Here McCourt tells us Malachy Snr, who throughout *Angela’s Ashes* is an extreme alcoholic who brings anguish and misery to his family with his lifestyle, is eventually able to sober up permanently during the last years of his life (McCourt, 3). Researching the topic of Irish stereotypes and thus reading the memoir from this perspective, I find it important McCourt note this at the start of the book. It helps McCourt avoid affirming Irish stereotypes, as his portrayal of Malachy Snr in the rest of the story predominantly focuses on his father’s difficult relationship with alcohol. Even in the later sections, however, some nuance exists to the portrayal of Malachy Snr, and it cannot be said that McCourt reduces his father to a mere stock character.

Malachy Snr’s alcoholism is a central theme in the story of *Angela’s Ashes* from beginning to end. He is unable to control his addiction as he drinks himself to the point of inebriation every time he receives enough money to buy alcohol. His drinking actively harms

Angela and the children, as he drinks his wages away when employed and often causes his own subsequent unemployment by drinking too much and being unable to show up to work the next day. When Malachy Snr migrates to England in search of work to support his family, Angela and the children are once again let down by him when he fails to send money over to them. This is later revealed as caused by Malachy Snr predictably spending all his wages in the pubs of England (McCourt, 264).

Despite the prominence of Malachy Snr's alcoholism as a theme in *Angela's Ashes*, this is not all McCourt has to say about him. McCourt depicts a kind of sombreness to his father, perhaps something of an acknowledgment of the troubles his addiction causes to his family, as well as at least an attempt at being a good, caring father. When Frank or his siblings protest their father's drinking he seems to react calmly, even despite social pressures to react with aggression. This is evident when Frank confronts his father for drinking during the day of Eugene's, Frank's recently deceased little brother's, funeral:

That's Eugene's coffin. I'll tell Mam you put your glass on Eugene's coffin.

Now, son. Now, son.

Dad' that's Eugene's coffin.

The other man says, Will we have another pint, mister?

Dad says to me, Wait outside another few minutes, Francis.

No.

Don't be a bad boy.

No.

The other man says, By Jesus, if that was my son I'd kick his arse from here to the County Kerry. He have no right to be talkin' to his father in that manner on a sorrowful day. If a man can't have a pint the day of a funeral what's the use of livin' at all, at all.

Dad says, All right. We'll go. (McCourt, 92–93)

Though it might seem obvious Malachy Snr react this way, when put into the context of the world of *Angela's Ashes*, this calm reaction and gentle submission to his son's protest is exceptional. As later discussed, McCourt's depiction of Limerick is that of a society that thrives on corporal punishment and absolute paternal authority. A society where gentleness

and kindness are looked down upon and confessing love to your family members is a sign of being “soft in the head” (McCourt, 239). Put into this context Malachy Snr is a deeply conflicted character: a father who tries to love his children, who cries and mourns wholeheartedly at the death of them and who tries to be there to support them but regardless is also a huge contributor to the traumatic conditions his children must endure. Frank himself describes the multifaceted nature of his father thusly:

I think my father is like the Holy Trinity with three people in him, the one in the morning with the paper [reading the news to Frank], 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. (McCourt 239)

Almost as a way of trying to compensate his inability to bring home sufficient funds to properly feed his family, Malachy Snr is depicted as starving himself purposefully to redistribute his portions to his children. Even during Christmas when the McCourt’s are forced to manage with eating a sheep’s head instead of a more traditional Christmas meal, Malachy Snr refuses his portion, opting instead to eat only the eyes of the sheep, claiming this to be a source of “great nourishment” (McCourt, 313).

2.2.2 Uncle Pa Keating and other Irishmen – The Responsible Men of Limerick

Juxtaposed to the more destructive alcoholism of Malachy McCourt Snr is that of Frank McCourt’s uncle Pa Keating, the husband of Frank’s maternal aunt Aggie, and his moderate yet regardless seemingly regular consumption of alcohol. Frank McCourt depicts Pa Keating in an overwhelmingly positive light when compared to his mixed, mostly negative depiction of his father. McCourt shows Keating as something of a role model to him: a responsible, calm, hard-working and funny man. When Frank and his siblings are temporarily living with their aunt and uncle due to their father being in England and their mother being in hospital for pneumonia, McCourt expresses himself thinking: “I could easily have Uncle Pa for a father” (McCourt, 284).

In terms of his drinking habits, Uncle Pa differs from Malachy Snr quite significantly despite also being a regular drinker. Uncle Pa embodies what Angela describes as a typical Limerickman. He wakes up early to go to work, works his daily hours, brings home his wages, then after his supper he ends his day at the pub, drinking one or two pints of stout before returning home (McCourt, 161). Uncle Pa is shown as having restraint; he doesn’t

squander away his earnings on alcohol, instead enjoying a moderate amount while socialising at the pub as is typical for the working men of McCourt's Limerick. His attitude of moderation in drinking is evident when he takes Frank to South's Pub for his first pint to celebrate Frank's 16th birthday (as is tradition in Limerick): "Frankie, may you enjoy the pint but not too much" (McCourt, 398).

Though Pa Keating is the most prominent of these, there are many other characters in *Angela's Ashes* who are depicted as drinking with restraint. One such character is Mr. Hannon, who is a neighbour of the McCourt family. For a brief stint Frank is employed as a helper of Mr. Hannon, who's body is in poor shape from his years of hard labour. During this period of his life Frank often ends his days at South's Pub, drinking lemonade while Mr. Hannon, Uncle Pa and Bill Galvin, who is a protestant lodger staying at McCourt's grandmother's house, enjoy their pints of stout. Despite all three being at the pub nearly every day of the week, none of them are described as being particularly drunken at any point of the memoir.

Of course, there are a few exceptions even with minor characters. One such exception is Peter Molloy, the father of Frank's friend Mikey Molloy. Peter Molloy is described as a "champion pint drinker" (McCourt, 126). Peter, like Malachy Snr, drinks his money away at the pub every day, priding himself in his drinking abilities. His actions cause great troubles to his family, causing his wife Nora to worry so much that she is often "carted off to the lunatic asylum" (McCourt, 126). Near the end of McCourt's memoir Peter, once again like Malachy Snr, seems to conquer his addiction, becoming, in his words, "the champion of no pints at all" (McCourt, 295). Peter's attempt to quit drinking is met with judgement from the local barman: "'Tis all them bloody books you're reading. They have your head destroyed" (McCourt, 295). This gives an indication to how temperance is viewed in Limerick.

2.2.3 From Angela McCourt to Mrs. Minihan – The Temperate Women of Limerick

Angela's Ashes depicts very little evidence of any women drinking regularly at all. One of the few times McCourt even faintly references a female character being drunk is when a young Frank is reading for Mr. Timoney, a blind old former soldier, who describes his usual assistant Mrs. Minihan as "legless with the sherry" (McCourt, 196) and therefore unable to show up to assist him. This statement is put into question when Angela explains to Frank that she knows Mrs. Minihan and that the real reason she no longer assists Mr. Timoney is due to Mr. Timoney's vocal dislike of the Catholic Church (McCourt, 198).

McCourt's writings indicate that although sherry seems to be the drink of choice to the women of Limerick (as is stout and whiskey to the men), they do not enjoy it on a regular basis. Female characters are seen drinking sherry on special occasions, for example after Eugene's funeral. Many of the mothers of Limerick are likely quite simply too busy to be drinking regularly, in McCourt's words having to "stay at home, take care of the children, clean the house and cook a bit" (McCourt, 118). Therefore, due to the patriarchal roles women are restrained to in *Angela's Ashes*, drinking remains an occasional pleasure to many of the women.

Moreso than with drinking, multiple women are depicted as keen smokers. McCourt depicts his mother Angela as smoking regularly, sometimes more intensely when she worries over how the family will survive over more extreme stints of poverty. The same way that drinking at the pub contains a social aspect to the working men of Limerick, smoking together is almost like a social activity in and of itself to the women. Angela is often depicted as smoking by the fire while talking to her friend and neighbour Bridey Hannon (McCourt, 252). There even appears to be an element of acknowledgement that the constant smoking the women engage in is harmful, but that life in Limerick is so hard that they don't care. As much is explicitly stated by Nora Molloy in the following excerpt:

The smoking brought on Nora's cough and she told Mam the fags would kill her in the end, that there was a touch of consumption [a colloquial term for tuberculosis] in her family and no one lived to a ripe old age, though who would want to in Limerick, a place where you could look around and the first thing you noticed was a scarcity of gray hairs [...] (McCourt, 69)

Perhaps the women of Limerick smoke for the very same reasons as their male counterparts drink, with the poor living conditions being a major influence.

2.3 Causes of drinking

There are multiple noticeable patterns and correlating factors to drinking in *Angela's Ashes*. As is evident in my findings, a clear gender division exists in drinking in McCourt's Limerick. Even the more moderately drinking men like Pa Keating drink daily. Not a single significant male character abstains from alcohol completely, except for most of the children, though many of them eagerly look forward to getting to drink their first pint. The central female characters on the other hand show no signs of consistency in drinking. Their consumption of alcohol is limited to that of an occasional indulgence. This gender divide

forms my key argument as to what McCourt is trying to say about the stereotype of Irish drinking in his memoir: In the Limerick of his childhood memoir, drinking is a social norm among men.

When Mikey and Peter Molloy go to the pub for Mikey's first pint, Mikey whispers to Frank, who is tagging along, that: "I don't think I like it, but don't tell my father" (Mccourt, 293). In the same section of the story Peter turns down the other men of the pub for offering drinks to Mikey, citing that "'twould be a terrible thing if he had too much and turned against it entirely" (Mccourt, 293). Here we see two examples of drinking being a strong social norm among men. Mikey knows the shame it would bring if he openly expressed his dislike, and Peter is determined to make Mikey's first experience with alcohol a good one. Peter is then quoted as saying "the mothers of Ireland are always enemies of the first pint" (Mccourt, 292). The men of Limerick are expected to start drinking at the young age of 16 as something of a rite of passage to manhood, something that is often met with resistance by their mothers. Drinking is so deeply rooted into masculinity, that to abstain from drinking entirely is even suggested to be a sign of homosexuality and untrustworthiness:

Eamon says, 'Tis what my father says about men who don't drink, they're not to be trusted. Peter says if you find a man that won't drink or smoke that's a man that's not even interested in girls and you'd want to keep your hand over the hole of your arse. (Mccourt, 404)

Although the social norm of drinking is not detrimental for well-adjusted people like Pa Keating and Mr. Hannon, who don't crave or need to drink in excess but can instead enjoy a few quiet pints at the pub after a hard day's work, for addicts like Malachy Snr and Peter Molloy this is a challenging norm to live with. On one hand to quit would be to be shunned and shamed as Peter Molloy is when he quits. On the other to try and drink in moderation becomes an impossible task, as time and time again Malachy Snr attempts this, eventually always staying in the pub for too long and drinking excessively (Mccourt, 191).

Another driving factor for alcoholism in Angela's Ashes is the relentless poverty and succeeding misery the people of the lanes of Limerick are subjected to in McCourt's memoir. Malachy Snr for example is shown to binge on alcohol during moments of great sorrow and stress, such as when his children die or when he is unable to get work or government assistance due to his Northern Irish origins. It is the same logic as Nora Molloy and many of

other women follow with smoking: Why even try and live healthily when living is to be subjected to such miserable conditions?

The latter claims are supported by research, as a 2010 study conducted by Cerdá et al. concludes that alcohol consumption is higher in poorer neighbourhoods (482). Other possible factors could include the influences of English culture and the Catholic church, as evidenced by a study researching the drinking habits of Irish students from family, historical and cultural perspectives (Delaney, Kapteyn and Smith 2013, 25). Therefore, a correlation can be found between these influences and a higher rate of alcohol consumption.

3 'The Fighting Irish'

3.1 The origins of the stereotype of violence

The stereotype of the Irish as a particularly violent people has come in many different shapes and forms and can be connected to many other phenomena central to the discussion Irish stereotypes. As a colonial stereotype the violent Irish were, at least in the case of Irish peasantry, seen as prone to a particular type of “unmanly” violence (Whelehan 2015, 1). This violence was characterised by other “unmanly” traits of emotional impulsivity as well as the previously discussed drunkenness. The connection of this stereotype to ideas of masculinity and manhood was intentional, as British colonists wanted to emphasise their idea of the Brit as the ideal, virtuous man by juxtaposing it to the idea of the emasculated, feminised Irishman (de Nie 2004, 23).

According to Katie Barclay in her article “*Stereotypes as political resistance: the Irish police court columns, c.1820-1845*” (2017) despite the negative connotations and origins of this stereotype, a version of it did emerge that was, to an extent, adopted by some Irish people as part of their national identity. Irish characters in fiction, though still portrayed as violent, were now presented as physically aggressive in a more traditionally masculine way. This was seen as a matter of pride due to it challenging “the powerlessness associated with colonial stereotypes” (Barclay, 279).

The development of this stereotype and its connection to masculinity was not exclusively an issue of Irish men, however. In M. Alison Kibler’s article *The Stage Irishwoman* (2005), Kibler describes stereotypes relating to violence being attached to the women in Ireland too, further elaborating that this was met with great offense by Irish people, as it attached masculine stereotypes to women. The stereotypes of Irishwomen stand in contrast to the British colonists’ feminised Irish man, as the Irishwoman was portrayed as “too muscular, aggressive and unattractive” according to many Irish protesters (Kibler, 4).

From the colonial perspective the Irish stereotype of violence did not only seek to mock Irish femininity and masculinity, as it eventually developed aspects of dehumanisation through “simianizing” the Irish. The simianization of the Irish was an attempt by British colonists to draw comparisons of the Irish as a ‘race’ to apes both in appearance as well as behaviour (Banerjee 2012, 30–31). These depictions were often accompanied by imagery of violence or potential violence as de Nie’s work displays (2004, 170). This dehumanisation of

the Irish was a product of the scientific racism that was popular at the time and was likely another method for colonists to justify the colonial rule over the “uncivilised” Irish.

3.2 The role of violence in *Angela’s Ashes*

To properly analyse the Irish stereotype of violence in *Angela’s Ashes* I divide instances of violence in the book to two subtypes: top-down, hierarchical and often punitive violence, which I will coin as authoritative violence, as well as other acts of violence which tend to be more impulsive in nature, which I coin as spontaneous violence. I use these subtypes to discuss the nature of the violence in McCourt’s depiction of Limerick as well as to contrast and correlate the two subtypes with one another. It is important to note that my focus in this section is on physical violence, with a lesser focus on verbal acts of violence. The latter I discuss in a third subsection, with my focus being on threats of physical violence and violent themes in the daily language of the people of Limerick.

3.2.1 Authoritative acts of physical violence in *Angela’s Ashes*:

Authoritative violence is perhaps the most prominent type of violence in *Angela’s Ashes*, as McCourt describes corporal punishment as prevalent both in school as well as at home. Violence is used as a method of disciplining as well as teaching and instilling respect in the children of Limerick. Forms of protest or ignorance or even just any deviation from the norms of Limerick are often met with swift acts of punitive violence. In this subsection I discuss the two main power dynamics of authoritative violence in *Angela’s Ashes*: familial and institutional violence. Additionally, I ponder the different functions allocated to authoritative violence in these instances.

In the category of familial acts of physical violence, I include not only acts of violence committed by parents to children but also acts committed by grandparents to children. Essentially these are all acts by figures of authority in the family unit committed to those lower in the family hierarchy, namely children. When a young Frank is sent by his grandmother Margaret Sheehan to deliver Bill Galvin his lunch, he, in his constant state of malnourishment, ends up eating the food himself. Upon discovery an angry Margaret smacks Frank on the head and orders him to deliver Bill Galvin a new portion under the threat of further violence (Mccourt [1996] 1997, 152). Here it is evident that familial violence can be used as a tool of punishment for misbehaviour.

Institutional violence in McCourt's Limerick is present in the two main institutions of McCourt's childhood and youth: school and church. Only at school, however, does this violence manifest to acts of physical violence. In McCourt's school, Leamy's National School, McCourt and his fellow students are subjected to continuous corporal punishment:

They hit you with the sticks on the shoulders, the back, the legs and, especially, the hands [...] They hit you if you're late, if you have a leaky nib on your pen, if you laugh, if you talk, and if you don't know things. (Mccourt, 84)

Here it is noticeable that institutional corporal punishment is not only limited to punishing misbehaviour, but also ignorance and disorganisation. The children are hit for being late, for not knowing the answer to the teachers' questions and even for minor mistakes such as having a leaky nib on their pens. Fear of punishment is a driving factor in getting the children to learn what they are taught. Sometimes corporal punishment is contradictory among the teachers as they teach children to adapt to their personal opinions:

One master will hit you if you don't know that Eamon de Valera is the greatest man that ever lived. Another master will hit you if you don't know that Michael Collins was the greatest man that ever lived. (Mccourt, 85)

This only perpetuates that physical violence towards children, although justified by the adults of Limerick as a tool to teach discipline and morality, is arbitrary and heavily normalised.

3.2.2 Spontaneous acts of violence in Angela's Ashes:

Spontaneous acts of violence in Angela's Ashes often manifest in forms such as drunken violence, violence amongst the children and violence as a form of rebellion or protest. These instances correspond more to the kind of violence that British colonists described the Irish as being prone to, as these acts are often correlated to emotional impulses. Although McCourt's memoir has numerous accounts of such violence, they are a minority in comparison to authoritative violence. In this subsection I discuss some of these accounts on a case-by-case basis, discussing the acts individually and their possible connotations.

One minor theme in *Angela's Ashes* is the bullying Frank experiences at school, in which he is picked on for being poor, for having a northern father as well as for being born in America. When Frank and his younger brother Malachy Jr arrive at Limerick and start

attending Leamy's National School, the boys at the school make fun of them for being Americans, with one of them calling Frank a "stupid yank" and pushing him. Provoked, Frank retaliates: "I rush at him, kicking and punching. I knock him down and try to grab his hair to hang his head on the ground" (McCourt, 83). Here Frank engages in a spontaneous act of violence in the form of self-defence. He describes his feelings of rage prior to the attack as "the blackness" which comes over him. These same feelings and actions are described a few times over as Frank defends himself and those around him from bullying and harassment.

There are multiple cases of drunken violence in *Angela's Ashes*, each of them having different implications. One of the most significant accounts is when Laman Griffin, a cousin of Angela's who lets the family stay at his house after they lose their home, beats up Frank in a drunken fit of rage. Although resembling the characteristics of authoritative violence, I choose to categorise it as a spontaneous act due to Laman Griffin's state of inebriation, the severity of the beating, Griffin's non-parental relation to Frank as well as McCourt's own reflection of the account. Frank stands up to Griffin, telling him he's not his father and is thus not allowed to order him to bed. This causes an angered Griffin to first punch Frank's shoulders as a warning for him to obey. When Frank refuses to obey, Griffin viciously attacks Frank, knocking him on his mother's bed and repeatedly punching Frank, who covers his head with his arms in helplessness (McCourt, 343). Distraught, Frank leaves Laman Griffin's house, never to return and holding a grudge towards Griffin till the end of the events of the book. Perhaps initially starting off as an act of authoritative violence, it becomes an outlier in accounts of violence in *Angela's Ashes* in its brutality and severity.

Following Griffin's assault of Frank, Frank himself ends up getting drunk a day before his 16th birthday, when Pa Keating buys him his first pint. Drunken, Frank returns home, which by now he shares again with his family as they have moved away from Laman Griffin's house. Frank then argues and provokes his mother for sleeping with Laman Griffin, eventually culminating in Angela pushing him and him slapping her in response (McCourt, 400). Frank expresses a great regret for doing this, later confessing his sins to a nearby priest, simultaneously opening up about his growing frustration in his life and the misery, poverty and death that has followed him up until this point (McCourt, 402-403). Frank's drunken state during the act of violence and his later expression of regret due to the act being against his values make this account another adequate example of spontaneous violence in *Angela's Ashes*.

3.2.3 Violence in the language of Limerick

In addition to physical acts of violence, violence is so deeply normalised in McCourt's memoir that it is often a feature in conversations, appearing directly as either threats or challenges. The former is evident when Frank, drunken and in a state of regret from slapping his mother, tries to confess his sins to a Jesuit brother, who threatens to break his hand if he doesn't go away (Mccourt, 399). As for the latter, Malachy Snr is often described as embarking on long, patriotic monologues ending with a challenge to fight all those who disagree: "He'll brag to the world he did his bit for Ireland when it was neither popular nor profitable, that he'll gladly die for Ireland when the call comes... and if anyone disagrees they're invited to step outside and settle this for once and for all" (Mccourt, 162). It is later implied that he gets into fights in England, presumably due to his boastful and loud-mouthed ways.

Violence enters the daily language of Limerick also through the themes of religious and patriotic language. McCourt describes his Catholic upbringing emphasising violence in the form of suffering in the afterlife for one's sins being used as a tool to get people to abide by the rules of the church and live a righteous life. Even a righteous life is connected to violence, as the priests of Limerick idolise the concept of martyrdom. This is part of a larger theme of sacrifice and suffering for "the greater good", which appears to be a core value in McCourt's upbringing not only in religion, but also in patriotism. Malachy Snr often talks and teaches his children to be ready to sacrifice themselves and die for Ireland. This is likely due to Malachy Snr himself being a veteran of the Irish war of independence. Frank McCourt, however, appears to be critical of this concept even at a young age, questioning it in the following excerpt:

The master says it's a glorious thing to die for the Faith and Dad says it's a glorious thing to die for Ireland and I wonder if there's anyone in the world who would like us to live. My brothers are dead and my sister is dead and I wonder if they died for Ireland or the Faith. (Mccourt, 124)

Here it is suggested, that these themes of sacrifice may serve as a way of explaining and justifying the high rates of infant mortality in McCourt's Limerick.

3.3 Causes of violence

McCourt's recollections of violence and its prevalence in his depiction of Limerick connects violence to many of the major themes of the book: to poverty, poor living conditions, masculinity, Catholicism and questionable methods parenting and teaching. In this subsection I go through each of these themes through the lens of the causes of violence in McCourt's Limerick.

As is the case with the prevalence of drinking in Limerick, violence, too, is heavily influenced by the surrounding poverty and emotional trauma in McCourt's memoir. This is noticeable from Frank's emotional outburst on his mother, which eventually culminates in him slapping her. He confesses this to the priest, simultaneously talking to the priest of all his childhood woes. Here McCourt intentionally connects the two themes together. The trauma of the death of his siblings, his father's alcoholism and the poverty that followed all create a continuum which culminated in a drunken, emotional and eventually violent outburst to his mother.

It is also important to note the contribution of authoritative violence in creating spontaneous violence. The World Health Organisation's official website cites that a child subjected to corporal punishment can have an "increased acceptance and use of other forms of violence" (WHO, 2021). Therefore, the spontaneous, emotional violence in *Angela's Ashes* is surely created in part as a direct consequence of the years and years of corporal punishment that the children of Limerick must endure at school and at home. Frank himself gets continuously smacked and hit by his family members and teachers alike, leading to violence becoming normalised in his life.

Violence in the language of *Angela's Ashes* is not only limited to direct methods such as threats and challenges, as it is also observed indirectly through the patriotic and religious language used in the memoir. Patriotic and religious discussion in *Angela's Ashes* is often characterised by concepts of sacrifice and suffering. The violent nature of Irish patriotism in McCourt's book is explained through the historical context of the memoir, with its events taking place in the Irish Free State, a state which had only just gained its independence by fighting a war for it. Due to his own involvement in it, Malachy Snr's patriotism is clearly expressed to be borne out of these events. The religious institutions on the other hand centre their language around violence to keep the faith among the people of Limerick and to justify the suffering and death that they are subjected to. This indirect violence only serves to further normalise violence in Limerick.

4 Conclusion

Reading *Angela's Ashes* through the perspective of the Irish stereotypes of drunkenness and violence, it is evident that McCourt does not shy away from confronting and engaging with both stereotypes. He reflects on his father's alcoholism through the conflict of his father's nature, depicting him as a man who wants and tries to be a good father, but who ultimately falls victim to his vices. McCourt also hints of a patriarchal set of values that encourages men to deal with their woes and hardships through drinking.

McCourt discusses the violence in his childhood home extensively, making a point of bringing up the harsh corporal punishment he was subjected to throughout his life and how this and the language around him shaped violence to become an outlet of expression for many people in Limerick. Violence creates more violence in McCourt's view, as he cites his own growing frustrations from the violent acts he is subjected to. Additionally, as with alcohol, he discusses the role of poverty in increasing it.

It is worth noting that there are many research-worthy aspects of McCourt's novel that I do not focus on in my thesis. For example, further research is necessary on the potential correlations between alcoholism and violence in McCourt's Limerick. In terms of factors that affect McCourt's portrayal of the Irish, his somewhat negative view on the Catholic Church is another potential avenue for additional research. A more extensive look into the historical context of the memoir could also provide more knowledge on McCourt's portrayal.

My research on McCourt's memoir could also be extended on by researching other Irish authors and their portrayals of Irish stereotypes. Another extension of my research could be of *Angela's Ashes* but through the lens of other Irish stereotypes, such as treachery or selfishness. A more extensive look into the effects of British colonialism to these stereotypes could provide more insight into this topic.

In conclusion, although McCourt does not outright deny the existence of these stereotypes and write extensively and solely about characters who do not drink or engage in violence, his writings do challenge these ideas when viewed in their entire context. McCourt does not blindly accept or enforce either stereotype, choosing rather to give context and nuance to them instead of depicting any of the people in his memoir as mere stock characters. With all of this taken to account, I deduce that McCourt is ultimately critical of stereotypical perceptions of the Irish as 'naturally' prone to drunkenness or violence.

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