

Angela's Ashes: Class Struggle and the Dream of Betterment

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze 'Angela's Ashes' to illustrate the class struggle and its effects on the society and characters. 'Angela's Ashes' is an Irish novel authored by Frank McCourt which is totally an autobiographical novel. It shows the financial and social troubles the McCourt suffer in both the United States and their homeland, Ireland. In order to understand the title of this paper and its aims, some aspects of Marxism theory is the main theory which will be applied covertly to accomplish this goal. This philosophy significantly focuses on economic issues and class issues among the members of that society. Furthermore, this novel basically as a biographical work speaks about the class struggle and the dream of going United States that the main character of this novel pursues in his puberty. For this analysis, this paper will examine the issues of 'Alienation', 'Religion' and 'Revolution' based on oppression which plays a significant role in these all three issues throughout the novel. These factors will be scrutinized based on Marxism basics carefully. In the end we will come to this conclusion that Frank leave Ireland to the United States because alienation caused in Ireland due to oppression and religion on its head which leads to an revolution in his inside regarding his future life based on the experience from his past and family troubles suffered during the first nineteen yours. This analysis have been partially overlooked in the research of scholars up now even though other various definitions or theories related to Marxism like sociology or psychoanalysis have been applied for this novel.

Keywords: Marxism, class struggle, alienation, religion, oppression, preliterate.

Introduction

"But in the measure that history moves forward, and with it the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines, they no longer need to seek science in their minds; they have only to take note of what is happening before their eyes and to become its mouthpiece. So long as they look for science and merely make systems, so long as they are at the beginning of the struggle, they see in poverty nothing but poverty, without seeing in it the revolutionary, subversive side, which will overthrow the old society. From this moment, science, which is a product of the historical movement, has associated itself consciously with it, has ceased to be doctrinaire and has become revolutionary." (Marx, Poverty of Philosophy, 1847)

'Angela's Ashes' is the Irish story of its author, Frank McCourt from the United States to Ireland, from misery to freedom for betterment. McCourt's memoir is an elaborated account of his infant years in Brooklyn, New York, and mostly his impoverished childhood and puberty in Limerick, a city in the west of Ireland, to which he came back with his parents, Angela and Malachy McCourt and his brothers with the agony of losing their only newly born sister. The author decided to tell his own story, in the present tense, more than forty years after he left a poor Ireland. This temporal distance enabled McCourt to come to terms with the fears and disasters that he suffered growing up in 1930's Ireland, such as the death of three siblings, typhoid fever, the loss of a father and bothering hunger that lasted for years.

Having retired from training writing at a diversity of New York City high schools in the United States, Frank McCourt was strong-minded to put pen to paper about his early youth life in Ireland before coming to America as his dream wish. The outcome, 'Angela's Ashes', was in print in 1996 by Scribner publication company and sold over five million copies; it has been published in twenty seven countries, translated into seventeen different languages and has won for McCourt the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, the ABBY Prize and at the summit the 1997 Pulitzer Award for Biography. Indeed, 'Angela's Ashes' sprang McCourt from an anonymous sixty year old first-time author to a world celebrated writer. As it is said in previous paragraph this novel with all its humours and agonies has been interestingly written in simple present tense except the first chapter regarding life in the United States. This tense in novel helps the reader to himself exactly in the narrator's (frank) shoes and feel all tortures suffered.

Frank McCourt remains objective all through the memoir without lecturing, hectoring, or protesting. And despite the fact that he might write harshly of his father's alcoholism, he sets balance of his treatment of Malachy McCourt (his father) with loving and affectionate memories. Likewise, he doesn't spare his mother, but readers

are of course on no occasion in doubt that she used to be a good mother. He is extremely expressive of the physical suffering he tolerated, which compliments the emotional guilt invoked by the Catholic Church, especially in parts regarding sexuality. In addition, McCourt's memoir also assists as a record of how humour can aid to overcome anguish and distress.

As it is crystal clear from two previous paragraphs, the novel's most important theme is hunger and destitution which lead to class struggle between the poor and the rich in the same society of Ireland. In this struggle religion and church in its head plays an important role which will come to focus of this article for its own individual part. In order to analyse this struggle and its effects on the main character of the novel, Frank on one hand, and the effects on Frank's decisions to leave this oppression for good on the other hand, this paper aims to take advantage of parts of Marxism literary theory and its ideas regarding classes and religion to expand my aims in this paper.

The most significant goal of Marxism philosophy is to bring about a classless society, centred on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Marxism is quite a materialist philosophy: that is, it attempts to elucidate things without supposing the presence of a world or of powers beyond the natural world around us, and the society we dwell in. It looks for tangible, systematic, reasonable clarifications of the world of observable truth, unlike the idealist philosophy which does accept as true the presence of a spiritual world elsewhere and would propose, for example, religious explanations of life and conduct.

Marxism initially starts with the ideas of Karl Marx with Friedrich Engels in nineteenth century. They themselves entitled their economic theories 'Communism' (rather than Marxism), describing their belief in the state ownership of industry, transport, etc., rather than private ownership. Marx and Engels announced the advent of communism in their jointly written 'Communism Manifesto' in 1848. Significantly, all other philosophies only search for understanding the world, while Marxism— as Marx famously said— seeks to change it. Marxism sees advancement and growth as coming about through the struggles for power between social classes. This outlook of history as class struggle (rather than, for example, a sequence of dynasties or as a regular progress towards the achievement of national identity and sovereignty) regards it as motored by the competition for economic, social and political advantage. The exploitation of one social class by another is perceived especially in modern industrial capitalism, predominantly in its unlimited nineteenth century form. The outcome of this exploitation is 'alienation' which is the state that appears about when the worker is 'disliked'; similarly what happens to Frank as the protagonist in the novel.

In this paper in order to accomplish the above mentioned idea regarding 'Angela's Ashes' various aspects is going to be analysed based on Marxism in the realm of 'Alienation', 'Religion', 'Revolution'. In all these aspects 'oppression' plays a significant role overtly and or covertly. As it comes from capitalism 'Oppression' in one of the many tools that the landlords take its advantage to get the working class work for them by long hours and low wages. In the case of oppressing the working class, the landlords or the people on power increase their power in the society since they know this fact that the working class or the preliterate (in the other words) have to do whatever they say just for the sake of survival and life.

Furthermore, in order to oppress the preliterate, the landlords take the advantage of religion as a tool for their benefit in this course. They mostly believe that religion is just for the lower class and this is what the lower class believes in as well. The part of this exploitation is the church that believes church should not see hunger or should not see itself long with lower class for its disciplines among people. This oppression from different angles on just the preliterate makes this lower class to hate the situation and to be in the thought of being isolated from this situation which brings them alienation. And finally, this hatred makes the lower class to be in the search for freedom from these oppressions that surely lead them to revolution. This is what Marxism mainly pursues in its philosophy as its part of aims.

Alienation

“A direct consequence of the alienation of man from the product of his labour, from his life activity and from his species-life, is that *man* is *alienated* from other *men*. ... man is alienated from his species-life means that each man is alienated from others, and that each of the others is likewise alienated from human life.” (Manuscripts, 1844)

The initial foremost area of the *Manuscripts* is related to alienation, a term that has got numerous clarifications. Alienation has got a technical and authorized definition, and it is frequently used to designate how we are or sense detached from happenings or circumstances that we are not mainly interested in. A dictionary meaning is “withdrawing or separation of a person or his affections from an object or position of former attachment” or, in the case of property, “a conveyance of property to another.” The concepts of 'separation' or 'transferring' something to a different owner are one technique of considering alienation, and surely, this is the technique that Marx cultivates the term. For Marx, the central feature of alienation is the separation of work or labour from the

worker, and separation of the products of labour from the worker. Equally both of them are concluded in being taken by owners and controlled by them, ruling the worker (the preliterature).

Malachy McCourt as the head of the family, in the United States after the death of their only newly born daughter, comes to this conclusion that there is no more space for them to live there. This reason comes from the issue that Malachy is very lazy and alcoholic person and mainly drinks up all the money earned from his short term career; therefore, most of the times he is drunk that makes him no to do his job properly. The lack of carefulness in his job has the employers to fire him out that work. After several times changing the job makes him frustrated and alienated from the short term work with very low wages.

The idea of immigrating to Ireland as their homeland comes with the dream of betterment for the family. However, not only does not their financial issues ameliorate, but also it becomes worse than before. Getting Ireland they understand that nobody wanted them even their own family and they are almost rejected both from society and family. By the strength and patience of the mother they do not give up and start their dwelling there. Malachy goes to find the work every morning till night but is not successful. After several times the father finds a job but like his old tradition in the United States earning the wage he attends the pub and waste all money there and come back home without money and drunk. Even the hunger that family suffers from does not make him to feel more responsible. One more time he finds himself isolated from work and becomes frustrated one more time. This time the turn is for England. Malachy leave Ireland to England for the betterment but this time these financial pressures and family problems makes him alienated from family and work together. Malachy abandon them for good.

As the narrative moves on, Frank endeavours to reach beyond the restrictions enforced upon him by poverty. He becomes strong minded to accomplish achievement in life and to provide for his family. Without a doubt, he is quite comforted to leave school at age of fourteen in order to find a career. Even though he does not obviously admit it, Frank is loaded by the requisite of performing as a father figure for his family. The abandon of father is the rise of Frank McCourt is the senior son and the protagonist of the novel. Frank cannot tolerate the hunger his family suffer so think about a job to feed his family; however, when his mother understand about his career prevent him from continuing it since it was damaging his health. The pressure of problems leads mother to accept sexual relationship and partial marriage with a man who is very rude to the children.

One more time, Frank cannot put up with his mother's affair with that man because of money and become alienated from house due to class differences between the man (owner of house) as a master and mother and children as servants for him. He leaves the house in search for a new job to survive. Entering the world of work opens new ideas and new issues for frank that he did not experienced them before like having sexual relationship with an upper class girl and losing his faith, etc. Therefore, Frank is alienated the same as his father but with this difference that his father became alienated due to work and finally family in the search for his freedom and happiness; while, Frank became alienated from his family due to losing patience to see his mother and brothers tortures in the search for bringing them happiness.

The lack of symmetry between the worker and the employer leads both to be in the thought of changing situation without changing the principles of the contract; that is, improving wages by employer and improving the quality of the outcome by the worker. This lack of symmetry results in alienation mostly for the worker and the alienation of the worker is in relation with low quality of the work done and finally the low of the profit which influence both the worker and the employer but the portion of the worker is bigger than the employer in this influence and lose. In the course of the novel it becomes quite crystal clear that both father and the son alienate differently but the both experience the same result which is the problem of hunger and poverty. This result leads the father to forget the family and think about himself while the same result makes the son to be more decisive to free the family from the Burdon of all problems that most of the families suffer due to situation of the country in that time.

Religion

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. (Marx, 57)

Mainly every person is in this belief that Marx was making words in this way that religion was dope produced by the powerful class to retain the common people happy. The actual Marx, however, was concerned with much more cumbersome difficulties. Among other issues, he was thinking about how an abstract mankind could be existent. He comes to this conclusion that one could not. 'Man is the world of man, state, society' and the conception of God was a necessary notion in an 'inverted world'. Just the once the world was right side up, the notion would not be required. For the meantime we ought to pay attention to it.

The church in the novel as it is clear has the biggest power in the society. Meanwhile the biggest portion of this

society is the preliterate and poor unlike the church. Therefore, in order to people to be controlled by the church, it should do some issues to keep them controlled and simultaneously silent not to protest. The only way that they find for this issue is the matter of religion. They use religion to fear them of God for the profit of their own position and power in the society. The church brings the people in a way that they cannot do more than the satisfaction of it. Because of this exploitation from religion, the church is very wealthy and the people who work there are considered as the upper class of the society. It is in a way that entering to the church and having a job there is the biggest dream of most of the youth in the course of the novel. As it can be understand from the ideas of Marx about religion, the church use this issue for the profit in first place in order not to give the opportunity to people to have progress in their live especially financially.

All through his childhood, Frank is weighed down by blame at his own sinfulness, mainly the sinfulness of his sexual considerations and behavior. He regularly fears that he is damned or that he has damned other people around. McCourt puts forward that his guilt affects chiefly from his Catholicism. In the days of Frank's childhood, priests vigorously warned against the sins of masturbation and sex—their reprimands disturbed Frank's thoughts. As he grows up, Frank learns to have the usage of confession to discharge himself of guilt, and he discontinues sensing doomed by his natural sexual desires.

The church has schooled the people in a way to repent every fast after doing a wrong action in the church that sometimes it is accompanied by money charging the priests to help them to repent or just listen to their penitence. The same issue happens for Frank in the novel. He is one of those people who fear from church a lot. Therefore, he goes immediately after doing any wrong action even for the ones that there is no need to go. This fear makes Frank to hate from the church gradually. This is in a way that when Frank is discovered by his teacher in school for the sake of great essay, he is introduced to church to become a priest, while he is one of those exceptions that does not enjoy this request unlike his mother's satisfaction. This displeasure to the church starts from the very beginning of the novel:

“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. . . . nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years.” (1)

On the other hand, this penitence which is not that much heartily he becomes to forget to attend the church gradually in a way that after having sex with a girl for several times he enjoys continuing this sexual affair rather than attending the church for penitence. This is because he comes to this conclusion that attending the church just waste his time to speak with some priest that sometimes do not like even to listen his words. Furthermore, this pressure of the church on people to keep them silent and religious comes to be one the tools for Frank to prefer alienation than to be in the service of the church which does its job for the sake of money and improving its own power. Unlike his father, Frank is very concerned with religion even if he does not interested in priests or being priest his heart has been partially occupied with religion to his mature age. However, it can be understood that is occupation is gradually reducing.

Revolution

Frank's Alienation from work and especially from home and family makes him to be in the thought of a revolution in his side and mind. Therefore, he starts to think optimistically for his future and in order to achieve his dreams struggles as much as possible. He works days fully even he steals the old lady's money after his death for whom he writes letter and earns good money for it. The summit of his dreams has been the nightmare of his father. It means he wishes to go to America to live and work. He is in this idea that America will give him the opportunities to live much better and to earn money— which is his first struggle—and to progress in his life. As usual mother is an angel figure supports him heartily even though she cannot support him financially.

This revolution for Frank is for the sake of class struggle in Ireland and lack of satisfaction financially. Low wages and long term work never satisfy the working class but they have no choice other than accepting the situation. According to Marx, class struggle makes the preliterate to go on by a glimpse to run away from this pressure. This glimpse is the revolution which waits for them. The same issue happens to Frank. Where start to have this glimpse from his childhood and this glimpse is becoming bigger and bigger by growing up. Being mature he decides to be alienated from his house because of lack of patience for the man who lives and has affair with his mother for the sake of survival and then he decides to live Ireland may be for good. These are the starts for the revolution in Frank even though, whether he would be successful or not in America is not clear. But referring to McCourt's biography we come to this conclusion that he will be successful in America; therefore,

this self-revolution is quite positive and suitable for him.

Conclusion

Angela's Ashes is mainly the story of the class struggle. The main character of this novel, Frank McCourt, from this class struggle makes for himself the dream of betterment. He finds this dream by immigrating back to the United States where his father with the family came back from due to financial problems. It is worth mentioning that this novel is a quite autobiographical memoir that the author writes and speaks about himself according to the history of Ireland. In order to analyse this class struggle and its effects on Frank this paper took advantage of the Marxism theory in partial.

In order to get the above mentioned achievement and application of Marxism theory for this work I did my best to look at this novel from different angles. First the 'Alienation' definition was gone under scope of this paper. 'Alienation' is one of the results that Marxism gets in its ideas. Then 'religion' comes to be analysed in this article. We come to this understanding from this definition that it helps the upper class to keep their power to retain the lower class silent and obedient. Finally, 'revolution' is spoken in a way this the result that of all pressures that come to the preliterate make them think about a revolution. In the story Frank can be a symbol of all other lower class people who finally take a suitable action to get rid of the upper class oppressions. This is what Marx believes as the final result of its own idea. It believes that lower class at the end will run a revolution against the landlords who have repressed them for a long time and lastly victory is with the lower class.

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