



# Purity and impurity in Angela's Ashes: a dynamic duality (autobiography and film)

Sarah Levy Valensi

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Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès

PURITY AND IMPURITY IN *ANGELA'S ASHES*: A DYNAMIC DUALITY  
(Autobiography and Film)



Mémoire de Master II Recherche Études du Monde Anglophone

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« On a beau faire, pour parler de la pureté il faut  
parler d'autre chose, et notamment de l'impur... » <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *Le Pur et l'impur*. Paris: Flammarion, 1978. p. 16.

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## INTRODUCTION

‘It is part of our condition that the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be hard and dead as a stone when we get it’,<sup>2</sup> states Mary Douglas whose literary work entitled *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* serves as a reference regarding the concepts of purity and impurity. In saying this, she touches on the quest for purity by commenting on its inherent vacuity and unattainability. Nonetheless, and despite the apparent disparity between purity and impurity, the aim of Douglas’ publication is ‘to show that rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience’.<sup>3</sup> To justify this remark, she argues that ‘they are positive contributions to atonement’.<sup>4</sup> In other words, that so-called ‘unity’ lies in the fact that purity and impurity take a step forward, so as to reach redemption and are thus deeply ingrained in religion. Consequently, the binary vision that is implied in this collocation of the pure and the impure might not be as definite as one may think. The present work is an effort to shed some light on these two concepts (purity and impurity) in *Angela’s Ashes*, a book written by Frank McCourt and its cinematographic adaptation by Alan Parker in which these notions are central.

The discovery of this book happened six years ago, and it has haunted me since. This piece of writing is extremely subjective, and this is what is of particular interest, especially the notion of intimacy which is enhanced thanks to the use of the first-person narrator. Through the personal pronoun ‘I’, Frank McCourt touches on the notion of truth and its connection with intimacy, a typical dimension of autobiography as was demonstrated by Philippe Lejeune,<sup>5</sup> whose theory will later be useful to our analysis. Sebastien Hubier further explains that intimacy and connection are linked. In fact, he argues that a first-person narration aims at revealing the author’s truths – whether they are essential or intimate –<sup>6</sup> to the reader. This book is an emotive personal account that is offered to the public. Indeed, it is McCourt’s own reality – but still a reality – at the time of the Great Depression in the 1930s and with the consequences of the Great Famine (1845-1852) in the background, that is unveiled here. Hubier insists on the fact that the first-person narration designates a simple and unique reality.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, ‘reality’

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Routledge, 2001. p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Lejeune, Philippe. *L’Autobiographie en France*. Paris: A. Colin, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Hubier, Sébastien. *Littératures intimes : les expressions du moi, de l’autobiographie à l’autofiction*. Paris : Armand Colin, 2003. Translated by the author : « les écritures à la première personne chercheraient donc toujours à révéler à leur auteur, voire au lecteur, ses vérités essentielles. Ses vérités tant personnelles qu’intimes... », p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author : « la première personne [...] désigne une réalité simple, unique. », p. 15.



does not mean truth since it is a personal point of view that is offered to the reader. Hubier even links it with the idea of subjectivity. According to him, using the first-person is a way of escaping universality.<sup>8</sup> After a second reading I thought that the notions of purity and impurity were striking and were later enhanced when I saw the film. In fact, a lot of scholars have written about these notions and have consequently given their point of view regarding the limits of purity and impurity. Amongst them are Mary Douglas, Vladimir Jankélévitch and Sylvain Matton, to mention a few. So as to support my arguments I will refer to many others such as André Bazin and Robert Stam all along this work.

Prior to *Angela's Ashes*' summary is the presentation of Frank McCourt. Born on August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1930 in Brooklyn, New York, USA, he became an Irish-American teacher for three decades before writing his masterpiece that is about to be studied. Without his wife, Frank McCourt's literary work would not have seen the light of day for it is on her advice that he wrote it. She also had a hand in his victory with the Pulitzer Prize that he won in 1997. It was such a success that British filmmaker Alan Parker decided to produce a screen version of it three years after the first publication of the book, in 1999. John Williams, the great American composer, conductor and pianist produced the music of the film. The viewer is literally carried away by it and goes from laughter to tears throughout the film. Angela, the mother, is played by Emily Watson and Malachy McCourt, the father, by Robert Carlyle. In order to follow the evolution of the lead character, three boys, three 'Frankies' were required to play Frank McCourt.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author : « La première personne [...] constitue donc le point d'ancrage de la subjectivité dans le langage : c'est à partir d'elle que pourra s'inscrire dans l'énoncé tout ce qui renvoie à la conscience de soi, à l'intériorité, à la singularité et à la spontanéité du *moi*, tout ce qui échappe à l'universalité et à la stricte observation du monde. C'est à partir d'elle que les connotations, les marqueurs de subjectivité, les évaluatifs et tous les partis pris axiologiques prendront leur sens. », p. 18.



Figure 1: Three Frankies (Source: <https://www.intofilm.org/films/3197> )

As the title indicates, the story is a ‘memoir of a childhood’ but not an ordinary one. In fact, *Angela’s Ashes* is more a ‘memoir’ than an ‘autobiography’ due to the period the author focuses on. It is not an account of his whole life, but of his childhood from the age of six to eighteen. As Jacques Lecarme and Eliane Lecarme-Tabone explain, a memoir is more focused on one specific part of an individual’s history and, to describe this phenomenon they use the term ‘sectorisation’. According to Philippe Lejeune, writing an autobiography aims at understanding a person in their entirety.<sup>9</sup> In this context, *Angela’s Ashes* does not correspond to an autobiography because the author only decided to focus on his youth. To use Gerard Genette’s words, the narration is autodiegetic. The story is about Frank McCourt also named Frankie, who has to face ‘a miserable Irish Catholic childhood’ (Mccourt 1) as he himself puts it. Both the reader and the spectator follow him from his youth to his first steps into adulthood through his ups and downs. Frank’s parents – Angela and Malachy – left New York and moved to Ireland in the 1930s, the time of the Great Depression, an event marking a new beginning in Frank’s life.

From that moment on, he began to be haunted with the American dream until his homecoming. He lived a tormented life, grew up in misery with an alcoholic father who abandoned his family and never returned. At a very young age he had to face the death of his brothers and to witness his mother’s pain as she had a succession of stillborn babies. Due to these numerous twists and turns, the title *Angela’s Ashes* immediately makes sense. In fact, Angela is the only woman and she desperately tries to keep the family united in such burdensome times. She is slowly falling

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<sup>9</sup> Lejeune, Philippe. *op. cit.* « Écrire son autobiographie, c’est essayer de saisir sa personne dans sa totalité, dans un mouvement récapitulatif de synthèse du moi. », p. 116.

apart, just like the ashes of the cigarettes she smokes. This image echoes Arthur Gribben's following observation to which Angela perfectly corresponds: 'In folklore as well as in literature, the image of the starving mother and child is used to represent the Famine's most unjust consequences. The woman is usually perceived as a model of heroic self-sacrifice'.<sup>10</sup>

The book goes back in time to the period when Frankie's parents met, whereas the film gives no account of their encounter. The paper version also goes further in time at the end by relating the first twenty-four hours of Frankie's arrival in New York. Amongst all the themes, the following ones are linked with the duality previously mentioned. On a larger scale misery is twofold because it includes poverty and hunger. Besides, patriotism and the sense of belonging are also to be taken into consideration. It is through education that masculinity<sup>11</sup> emerges. Once understood in relationship with a patriarchal society, the notion of masculinity starts to be linked with the place of women at home – which echoes the 'Angel in the house' that Angela could potentially embody as she struggle to take care of the household – and more precisely hygiene, thus purity.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, religion rules the life of the McCourt family and of the Irish at large, especially those who, like the McCourts, left Ireland to go to the United States of America. In his book *The Truth About the Irish*, Terry Eagleton comments on the omnipresence and significance of Catholicism: 'Since the decline of the Irish language, Catholicism has become the single most important mark of Irish identity'.<sup>13</sup> Once again, he brings to the fore the topic of religion and reminds how central religion was (and remains) for the Irish people. Religion is also intimately linked with both terms: 'purity' and 'impurity' as will be seen later on.

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<sup>10</sup> Gribben, Arthur, ed. *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999. p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> 'The state or fact of being masculine; the assemblage of qualities regarded as characteristic of men; maleness, manliness'. See: 'Masculinity, n.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 15/06/2021. This definition corresponds to the literal sense of the word. However, by extension one must understand it alongside authority and a man's place in society whether it is in the public or in the private sphere, especially in *Angela's Ashes*.

<sup>12</sup> Welzer-Lang, Daniel. 'Débattre des hommes, étudier les hommes et intervenir auprès des hommes dans une perspective de genre', Daniel Welzer-Lang éd., *Masculinités : état des lieux*. Érès, 2011, pp. 41-54. 'Dans l'espace domestique, là où les hommes étaient généralement absents et/ou exclus, l'analyse du 'propre et du rangé' ouvre sur des formes de réflexion qui manifestement n'ont pas l'heur de plaire à ceux qui veulent victimiser les femmes partout et sur tout. Dans un espace traditionnel, les femmes, mises en situation de compagne et/ou de mère, nettoient avant que cela soit sale. Elles sont préventives. Et cela pour maintes raisons liées aux apprentissages sociaux, mais aussi parce que nos sociétés patriarcales ont l'habitude d'assimiler l'intérieur psychique d'une femme-mère à ce qu'elle donne à voir dans la gestion du propre et du rangé 'chez elle'. 'Si c'est sale chez elle, c'est sale en elle', semble dire la maxime. Et cela même si, avec un peu de raison, chacun-e peut s'accorder sur le fait que propre, rangé, désordre sont des notions hautement culturelles qui varient d'une région à l'autre, d'une époque à une autre et en fonction d'autres facteurs comme les conditions géographiques et météorologiques ». p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> Eagleton, Terry. *The Truth About the Irish*. Dublin: New Islands Books, 1999. p. 87.

Indeed, the *Online Etymology Dictionary* traces the origins of the word now known as ‘purity’ back to 1200. Originally *purite*, this term meant ‘freedom from moral contamination, sinlessness, innocence; righteousness, chastity’; hence its explicit religious connotations. The Old French *purete* stood for ‘simple truth’; thus, one can establish a link between purity and moral values such as truthfulness for instance. Nevertheless, if one sticks to its Latin origin *puritatem* meaning ‘cleanness, pureness’ then, a parallel can be drawn with the notion of hygiene. Finally, if one goes back to the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century and the Latin word *purus* that referred to the ‘unmixed’, the term connotes the idea of adultery, and even touches upon the notion of eugeics. The etymology of a word is closely linked with the definitions that stem from it. The term ‘impure’, actually comes from the Old French *impur* and from the Latin *impurus*. The former meant ‘muddy, not clear’, echoing a visual aspect, whereas the latter meant ‘not pure, unclean, filthy, foul’ and introduced a sanitary dimension. It is only circa 1500 that ‘impurity’ started having a religious facet.

On the one hand, ‘purity’ is a noun that refers to ‘the state or quality of being morally or spiritually pure; sinless; freedom from ritual pollution; ceremonial cleanness; innocence; chastity’.<sup>14</sup> To this is added the idea of the ‘unmixed’. On the other hand, ‘impurity’ is ‘the quality or condition of being impure or of containing something foul or unclean, or offensive matter, dirt’. It is also ‘the state or condition of being morally impure’.<sup>15</sup> In addition to that are associated ‘uncleanness, unchastity and defilement by sin’<sup>16</sup>. Corruption is another feature of impurity.

On a more theoretical aspect and to go further in the explanation of these concepts especially purity, Moshe Blidstein adds an important feature to the definition of that term by noticing that ‘despite its centrality, purity is treated as an *ad hoc* concept accompanying other concepts such as *askesis*, abstinence, and sin, and not understood in its own right’.<sup>17</sup> The message conveyed through his quotation is that purity cannot work alone but in relation to other concepts. Although there is some truth to Blidstein’s argument, I would go further and be more explicit about his use of the term ‘accompanying’. I would argue that purity is to be seen as the superordinate of the other concepts ‘accompanying’ purity, in other words, they stem from it. In my opinion, purity implies a certain hierarchy regarding the concepts that surround it. Blidstein is, I think, completely right while saying that ‘the connotations of purity terms are

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<sup>14</sup> See ‘Purity, n.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 27/02/2021.

<sup>15</sup> See ‘Impurity, n.’ *Ibid*. Accessed 27/02/2021.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> Blidstein, Moshe. *Purity, Community, and Ritual in Early Christian Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2017. p. 4.

wide, frequently general and imprecise, and not necessarily religious'.<sup>18</sup> His last aspect concerning religion is extremely interesting especially in this paper because I will try to prove that, indeed, religion is central to the notions of purity and impurity, but that they are not always to be understood and studied in relation with religion. On a more general aspect, 'purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise'<sup>19</sup> as was written by Douglas. The opposite is called 'impurity' and the prefix -im conveys negativity.

The choice of this dissertation's title, and especially the collocation 'dynamic duality' may be surprising for it seems to be an oxymoron. Indeed, one may quite rightly think that a duality offers a binary vision of something whereas the adjective 'dynamic' proposes something more flexible. However, I will attempt to prove that *Angela's Ashes* cannot be classified as a pure or impure work, nor can its characters. It is of particular interest to note that the adjective 'dynamic' includes in its definition the sense of 'active'<sup>20</sup> and is to be understood as 'opposed to static'.<sup>21</sup> What is meant behind this is the fact that this duality is not frozen nor fixed; it does not belong to a specific mould, and this is due to the wide 'implicatures', to use Paul Herbert Grice's word, that lie behind purity and impurity. By 'implicature', Grice means that one cannot limit himself to what he hears or reads but that what is truly signified goes beyond what is expressed. In articulating that 'purity and impurity are by no means themes limited to the past',<sup>22</sup> Robbie Duchinsky underscores the relevance and the legitimacy of the present work and its connection, not only with the literary and the filmic domains but with life in general – thus proposing that purity and impurity are worth studying even today. An important idea that must be kept in mind all along this paper is that these two concepts are always studied in relation to a particular context, just like colours and their symbolism. As Stella Paul<sup>23</sup> argues, 'no colour is independent nor pure, they are all linked to a context, an environment'.<sup>24</sup> Following on from last year's dissertation, this thesis pays some attention to colours and their relation to purity and impurity but are not the crux of this study.

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

<sup>19</sup> M, Douglas, *op. cit.* p. 163.

<sup>20</sup> See 'Dynamic, adj. and n.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 28/02/2021.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Duchinsky, Robbie - Schnall, Simone - Weiss, Daniel H, ed. *Purity and Danger Now: New Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Stella Paul is a specialist of American art whose research focuses on the second half of the twentieth century. Many of her works are related to the notion of colours.

<sup>24</sup> Paul, Stella. *L'Histoire de la couleur dans l'art*. Paris : Phaidon, 2018. Translated by the author: « Aucune couleur n'est indépendante ni pure, toutes sont liées à un contexte, à un environnement », p. 9.

It is consequently of interest to wonder how the notions of purity and impurity are conveyed in both the novel and the film with the constant religious background of Irish Catholicism, but also through the styles and themes of each artwork. In order to answer this question, I have purposefully decided to use a comparative method inspired by Gérard Genette's narratology that I have adapted to film studies. Chapter One focuses on an oscillation between purity and impurity through innocence. This opening chapter is further divided into three subcategories. The first adopts a religious perspective and focuses on innocence. The second lays emphasis on children as symbols of innocence, before turning to the (im)purity of cinematographic adaptation in a last subsection, in which Bazin's concept of 'impure cinema'<sup>25</sup> serves as a basis for discussion. Then, Chapter Two investigates the impure dimension of otherness leading to ostracism by showing that religion serves as the root of otherness in exclusion, by focusing on eugenics and the question of immigration, and by taking a more historical approach concerning nationalities. The third and last chapter discusses the paradox of religion and develops a criticism of Catholicism as a quest for purity. In this chapter, two different experiences of religion are analysed: the focus is first on individual and then on collective practice, the former corresponding to a personal experience of religion and purity, and the latter expressing a criticism of religious institutions. Finally, a last subsection explores the scape goat mechanism which is triggered by the dynamic tensions between purity and impurity.

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<sup>25</sup> Bazin, André. *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma ?* Paris : les Éditions du Cerf, 1985. p. 81.

## I- AN OSCILLATION BETWEEN PURITY AND IMPURITY THROUGH INNOCENCE

### 1. RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE: A QUEST FOR INNOCENCE

A quest for innocence implies a quest for purity. Religion may be key for its attainment, even if it seems almost impossible to reach for a person.

Catholicism is central to the world of the movies for a variety of reasons. During the golden era of the 1930s and 1940s, Catholic characters represented the immigrant other – a character distinguished from the native-born Protestant American. Moviemakers placed the Irish (and, later, Italians) in the ‘old neighbourhood’ where they listened to Catholic priests, sang Catholic hymns and went to Catholic schools. Catholicism marked these immigrants’ characters as somewhat foreign and alien but also as profoundly local and American.<sup>26</sup>

Religion, and more precisely Catholicism, is to be put at the heart of a vast array of American movies. McDannell reveals the importance of Catholicism in cinema. In fact, whether it is in literature or on screen, religion is very interesting as it represents a dimension of Irish identity throughout centuries. It is worth focusing on, especially in *Angela’s Ashes* as Frank himself declares: ‘Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood’ (McCourt 1). What makes the difference in his remark is his mention of Catholicism. The question here is not judgmental: he does not approve or disapprove of this religion, but in both cases, it shows how central it was to Frank’s life and to Irish people on a larger scale.

Religion and innocence are linked with colours which play a significant role in both the paper version and the screen adaptation of *Angela’s Ashes*. The colour brown is the most revealing of innocence as it is not bright. As Michel Pastoureau explains, every colour or object that is eye-catching represents an obstacle for piety.<sup>27</sup> Not only is brown associated to one of the four colours (black, white, grey, dark) of clergymen since the Middle Ages, but particularly to Saint Francis of Assisi who symbolises nature and modesty. Michel Feuillet says explicitly: ‘brown is the colour of the earth. It symbolizes humility’.<sup>28</sup> Frank was named after this Saint: ‘There’s

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<sup>26</sup> McDannell, Colleen. *Catholics in the Movies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Pastoureau, Michel. *Figures et couleurs : études sur la symbolique et la sensibilité médiévales*. Paris : Le Léopard d’or, 1986. Translated by the author : « Comme tout ce qui capte trop le regard, les couleurs sont un obstacle à la piété. » p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Feuillet, Michel. *Lexique des symboles chrétiens*. Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 2009. Translated by the author : « Le marron est la couleur de la terre. C’est le symbole de l’humilité. », p. 72.

a picture on another wall of a man with a brown robe and birds all over him. Fintan says, Do you know who that is, Francis? No? That's your patron, St. Francis of Assisi' (McCourt 98). The fact that the colour of the robe was mentioned is extremely important because this is how one recognises the Saint. The use of the term 'patron'<sup>29</sup> is interesting because the Oxford English Dictionary clarifies the idea of protection connoted by the word. It is defined as follows: 'a person standing in the role of oversight, protection, or sponsorship to another'. The second definition given is related to the religious domain: 'a saint whose intercession and protection a person, place, occupation, etc., is especially entrusted'. The two shots below illustrate this notion of protection:



Figure 2: Saint Francis' brown robe [02:09:02]



Figure 3: Two Saint Francis [02:09:15]

Figure 2 offers a low angle shot which gives an impression of protection. In fact, Saint Francis keeps an eye on Francis. Figure 3 clearly emphasizes this notion of protection for there are two Saints around Frank, one stands above him while another comes behind him. The second one is a priest whose position says a lot about Frank's protection. The priest on the right looks like an embodiment of the Saint for he is dressed the exact same way as the statue standing above Frank. Not only is the brown robe important but the belt too. Michel Feuillet explains that the belt is essential to primitive clothes and once the belt is tied around the waist it implies order. He argues that when someone ties it by himself it proves a certain form of spiritual maturity.<sup>30</sup> To begin with, the fact that Frank is kneeled, head down while the priest stands up, head up, reveals that the Saint sees more than Frank. The former has a more general view about the situation and maybe Frank's problems at large. Then, the fact that Frank is from the back, and

<sup>29</sup> See: 'Patron, n.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 06/03/2021.

<sup>30</sup> M, Feuillet, *op. cit.* Translated by the author : « Ceinture : élément essentiel du vêtement primitif, la ceinture nouée autour de la taille suggère une idée d'ordre : elle est perçue comme une contrainte, voire comme une malédiction (PS 109, 19). Nouer soi-même sa ceinture est une preuve de maturité spirituelle donnée par l'esprit (JN 21, 18) », p. 24. Here 'PS' stands for 'Psalms' and 'JN' for 'John'.



that he cannot see the priest coming towards him enhances the protection of Saint Francis. The message is that even when Frank is at his lowest, his patron looks after him, especially when he does not think so. It seems that Frank called him for help, and he immediately came to his rescue. The idea of protection appears later in the book: ‘There is an arm around my shoulders, a brown robe, click of black rosary beads, a Franciscan priest’ (McCourt 221). This is how this passage is reproduced on screen:



Figure 4: Priest's hand on Frank's shoulder [02:09:22]

The juxtaposition of the segments in this sentence and the fact that ‘a Franciscan priest’ marks the end of it, conveys an impression of a revelation, as if the priest were an unexpected apparition. Furthermore, three out of the five senses are indicated: touch, hearing and sight. Frank is moved when he sees and feels a presence for it means that he is not alone anymore. The help he asked for by praying at the foot of Saint Francis’ statue finally came. Moreover, as Michel Feuillet argues, both the hand and the arm symbolise ‘power, dominating power, benevolent or protective assistance’,<sup>31</sup> once again protection is mentioned. The quest of

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<sup>31</sup> M, Feuillet, *op. cit.* Translated by the author : « Comme la main, le bras est un symbole de pouvoir, qui peut signifier la puissance dominatrice ou aide bienveillante et protectrice. », p. 21.

simplicity, and thus, of innocence implied by the ‘semi-colour’<sup>32</sup> brown in the religious field leads to another quest, that of a sinless life.

Being in search of a sinless life assumes changing to reach purity. This process of change is called *purification*. It is a process which implies transformation, something going from one state or condition to another. Mosche Blidstein explains that ‘A person may [...] attempt to achieve purification by strengthening the pure aspects and weakening the impure’.<sup>33</sup> He also adds that ‘purification consists in the separation of pure from impure’.<sup>34</sup> What brings innocence and the two notions under study – purity and impurity – together, is that very process of purification. The term ‘innocence’ is intimately linked with purity for it is defined as ‘freedom from sin, guilt or moral wrong in general’<sup>35</sup> but also as ‘the state of being untainted with, or acquainted with evil; moral purity’.<sup>36</sup> Thus, there is a three-way connection between the notions of (im)purity, innocence and purification; they are all linked between each other and raise the question of rituals in religion. Several rituals in the sense of religious traditions appear in *Angela’s Ashes* and the first one is baptism.

Baptism is extremely important for it is the first one that makes a new-born enter into Catholicism. It is a first step towards purity, otherwise babies are seen as ‘doomed’, in the sense of impure as explains Frank: ‘those little pagans doomed forever for lack of baptism’ (McCourt 73). The term ‘doomed’ is powerful because it refers to Limbo, ‘a place for unbaptised babies’ (McCourt 114). The fact that they are put aside because they did not have a proper first ceremony is strong. It looks as if they were directly sent to hell because they are not considered as pure contrary to those baptised. Drawing a parallel with hell is not as farfetched as it seems for ‘sources from the second century speak of baptism expelling impure demons, the fire of lust, corporeality, or evil in general’.<sup>37</sup> In this explanation, it is the lexical field of hell that has been chosen. What the future holds for those who go to Limbo is frightening and dreadful: ‘a place [...] where it may be warm but still, dark forever and no hope of escape even on the Judgement Day’ (McCourt 114). The adjective ‘dark’ enhances the sombre fate saved for the unbaptised. Baptism is part of that purification process mentioned earlier because it represents a ‘series of actions centering upon being washed in water in the name of Jesus, serving for

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<sup>32</sup> Pastoureau, Michel, Simonnet, Dominique. *Le Petit livre des couleurs*. Paris : Points, 2014. « demi-couleur ». p. 115.

<sup>33</sup> M, Blidstein, *op. cit.* p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> See: ‘Innocence, n.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 13/04/2021.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> M, Blidstein, *op. cit.* p. 107.

initiation into the Christian community. Only through the transformation of baptism could a person join the community and take part in its most sacred rites, especially eucharist'.<sup>38</sup> The use of two key words prove that baptism is truly a process because the term 'transformation' is used. The second one, 'initiation', supposes that other rituals will happen, hence this idea of change and transition. The aim of baptism is to bring these infants closer to purity so as to render them innocent from a religious perspective and this is something that Blidstein insists on: 'Baptism was thought to remove negative elements from the person: it absolved past sins, an action frequently described as purification'.<sup>39</sup>

The first communion also appears in *Angela's Ashes* and is described by Frank as follows: 'The master says it's time to prepare for First Confession and First Communion, to know and remember all the questions and answers in the catechism, to become good Catholics, to know the difference between right and wrong, to die for the Faith if called on' (McCourt 69). What is particularly striking in this example is the duality between purity and impurity expressed in the segment mentioning what may be right or wrong. The phrase 'good Catholics' hides the notion of purity. Indeed, 'good' means 'strictly adhering to or loyally fulfilling all the principles of a particular religion, political party or ideology, or other cause',<sup>40</sup> the adjective 'all' excludes any form of exception, but, on the contrary, conveys a feeling of universality linked with the notion of purity. This ritual is important in the life of a Catholic because even 'The master himself has to show [the pupils] how to receive Holy Communion' (McCourt 74-75) as is revealed by the shots below.



Figure 5: The master [00:41:11]



Figure 6: Frank [00:41:09]

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 108.

<sup>40</sup> See: 'Good, adj., n., adv., and int.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 13/04/2021.

It seems that the only path to purity lies in the respect of religious traditions otherwise if one never received a First Communion, he 'is not a proper Catholic' (McCourt 71). What is remarkable in McCourt's description regarding these religious traditions is that they are always narrated in a humorous way as illustrated by Figures 5 and 6 above. Indeed, the way they pull out their tongues is a bit ridiculous and disgusting. It is a gesture that is present in the text: 'He's not a proper Catholic because he could not receive his First Communion for fear of getting anything on his tongue that might cause a fit and choke him' (McCourt 71). It is the exaggeration, dramatization, in what could possibly happen that makes the reader laugh because this is almost impossible. Even though humour will be further analysed in this paper, it is worth mentioning, especially when it is used in relation to traditional, thus serious, events such as religious ceremonies.

The third ritual is Confirmation; 'Priests and masters tell us Confirmation means you're a true soldier of the Church and that entitles you to die and be a martyr in case we're invaded by Protestants or Mahommedians or any other class of heathen' (McCourt 177). The ardour with which these words are pronounced in the movie is to be observed in the shot below where the master clenches his fist. Not only does it reveal the importance of that ritual but the devotion of a Catholic too. This medium shot portrays the master looking down as if he were observed by God. By teaching the religious meaning of Confirmation he acts as a mediator between God and his pupils. In the background, all the boys are out of focus, and this has a double meaning. On the one hand, it can mean that truth is now being expressed by the master and nothing else matters at that moment, nothing is more important than God. On the other hand, and most importantly, it reveals how trustful, all the boys are to what their master is saying. The fact that the children's faces are blurred, makes them look all similar, meaning that, thanks to Confirmation, they will be set on an equal footing in front of God.



Figure 7: Closed fist [01:04:06]

Furthermore, that feeling of devotion was also present in the previous shots (Figures 5 and 6) where Frank had his eyes closed. This behaviour reveals the blind faith of believers.

The last ritual is the celebration of Christmas which, despite the miserable life the McCourt family is living, it reminds them of the weight religion has in their lives. Angela did everything she could to buy or beg for food to feed her family on this special day: 'Mam takes Malachy and me to St. Vincent de Paul Society to stand in the queue and see if there's any chance of getting something for the Christmas dinner' (McCourt 58). They were given 'a docket for groceries at McGrath's and another one for the butcher' (McCourt 59).



Figure 8: Christmas docket [01:26:53]

In this shot, the piece of paper is in the foreground and is almost as big as Angela's body. It proves how important it is for her and her family. Celebrating Christmas like a 'good Catholic' depends on that paper and that is why she cannot keep an eye off that precious ticket. Christmas is linked with innocence and purity because it originally refers to the birth of baby Jesus whose father is said to be the Holy Spirit, which consequently makes him a Saint too. By being a Saint, he embodies and spreads purity to the Catholics.

Finally, the need for confession is part of the quest for forgiveness, it constitutes a ritual for purification, for it aims at freeing oneself from his sins as proves the wording 'Bless me Father for I have sinned' (McCourt 78). Whenever Frank commits a sin, he goes to confession because he knows it is the only way to be forgiven. However, when he hit his mother and is asked to go to confession, he thinks that for the first time God will not forgive him and answers to the priest standing next to him: 'I can't Father. I did terrible things' (McCourt 222). It seems that there are some degrees of sins that God can or cannot forgive. Nevertheless, the clergyman tells him that 'God forgives all who repent' (McCourt 222). At that precise moment (see Figure 9) Francis feels intense pain and almost loses his faith: 'St. Francis is no help, he won't stop the tears bursting out of my two eyes' (McCourt 221).



Figure 9: Frank is crying [02:09:36]

By crying Frank shows contrition, he feels extremely guilty, and the candles in the foreground as well as their reflection in his eyes, reveal the intensity of his sorrow. It echoes a sentence written by Vladimir Jankélévitch: ‘What the creature has probably lost by committing a sin, it must find it again by the effort of his will and repentance [...] this restoration of our integrity is nothing else than ‘purification’.<sup>41</sup> Here, going to confession is a way of achieving purity and reaching the state of innocence through the process of purification.

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<sup>41</sup> V, Janlévitch, *op. cit.* Translated by the author : « Ce que la créature a peut-être perdue par son péché, elle doit le retrouver par l’effort de sa volonté et par son repentir [...] cette restauration de notre intégrité n’est rien d’autre que la purification. », p. 21.



## 2. CHILDREN AS SYMBOLS OF INNOCENCE

The child is the very innocence, or the substantial purity, but by definition, he knows nothing about it; the child is pure, but he does not know it and he is accurately pure on the condition of ignoring it.<sup>42</sup>

According to Vladimir Jankélévitch and the above quotation, children are pure because of their innocence, in the sense of ignorance. He argues that the ‘incipient being’<sup>43</sup> is intrinsically pure for ‘the relatively incipient being, that is to say just being born or new-born, is pure by definition because what pre-exists him could not have influenced him for he did not exist’.<sup>44</sup> It is that precise link with the notion of purity in relation with children in *Angela’s Ashes* that is about to be studied in this subsection. Indeed, in the film, Frank’s first confession is concluded by his question ‘Am I one of the worst of all the boys, Father?’ (McCourt 79). First of all, purity and innocence are to be found in the symbolism of the colour white and paradoxically when infants died as shown in Figure 10 below.



Figure 10: White coffin [00:20:41]

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author: « L’enfant est l’innocence même, ou la pureté substantielle, mais par définition, il n’en sait rien ; l’enfant est pur, mais il ne le sait pas, et il n’est précisément pur qu’à la condition de l’ignorer », p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author: « l’être commençant », p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author: « D’abord l’être relativement commençant, c’est-à-dire naissant ou nouveau-né, est pur par définition car ce qui lui préexiste ne pouvait l’influencer puisqu’il n’existait pas », p. 27.



As Michel Pastoureau explains, whiteness expresses both purity and innocence,<sup>45</sup> and is not always associated to a positive event. It is an ambivalent colour because white ‘talks about the essential: life and death’.<sup>46</sup> Besides, when this particular colour is associated with black, it enhances the duality between both because of the contrast created. Not only is this duality in colours but in their values and what they represent as well. White often indicates purity while black is for impurity. This is to be observed in Figure 11 below which corresponds to the following sentence in the book: ‘They’re not talking but staring straight ahead and their black pints are resting on a small white coffin on the seat between them’ (McCourt 52).



Figure 11: Beers on white coffin [00:26:16]

In Figure 10 the white coffin is that of Frank’s sister, Margaret, whereas here, it is that of Eugene, one of the twins’ brothers. Figure 11 is a point of view shot, in other words, the viewer is offered Frank’s vision when he opens the door. Not only does he see his father drinking beer at a pub the day of his brother’s death, but an unknown man shares this alcoholic drink with him. As if that were not enough, the beers are put on the little boy’s coffin originally white but actually stained with the beverage. The whiteness of the coffin reminds us of the innocence and

<sup>45</sup> Pastoureau, Michel, Simonnet, Dominique. *Les couleurs expliquées : en images*. Paris : Seuil, 2015. Translated by the author : « Le blanc : partout il dit la pureté et l’innocence », p. 57.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author : « [le blanc] nous parle de l’essentiel : la vie, la mort », p. 59.

the purity of that young boy who has just died and could do nothing to stop his father from drinking. The contrast between these two colours is rendered even stronger because of the lighting. In fact, it is the whiteness' intensity of the coffin and the dimly lit room that trigger the viewer's attention and underpin the feeling of fear that Frank feels at that moment. He is 'frightened by the two black pints on [the] white coffin' (McCourt 52). Besides, the more one looks at the very end of this shot, the darker it is. Malachy sr., by standing on the right side of the shot, enters into this darkness as if he were going to Hell. Half of his face is already in the dark and it seems that the more he drinks, the more he dives into alcoholism. The colour black that Malachy sr. is falling into does not only indicate the absence of light but is to be understood in the sense of an 'extinct life and essential impurity'.<sup>47</sup>

Children's innocence is also rendered through their body language; in fact, 'willingly or not, humans when in co-presence, continuously inform one another about their intentions, interests, feelings and ideas by means of visible bodily action'.<sup>48</sup> A gesture that the children, and especially the twins, keep doing all along the movie is pointing. They are too young to talk, thus, they point at things and people as it can be observed in Figure 12 below.



Figure 12: Pointing [00:05:30]

<sup>47</sup> Badiou, Alain. *Le Noir : éclats d'une non-couleur*. Paris : Éditions Autrement, 2016. Translated by the author: « le noir pensé comme absence de lumière, vie éteinte et impureté primordiale », p. 79.

<sup>48</sup> Kendon, Adam. *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p. 1.

Frank notices his brother's gesture and says 'he only points' (McCourt 49). This sentence, simply composed of a subject, an adverb and a verb, symbolises the simplicity with which children express themselves, it indicates their innocence for it raises the question of intention. Their lack of verbal communication, combined with their nakedness, reinforce the purity of these children. Indeed, these boys are too young to be aware that pointing at people is universally disliked;<sup>49</sup> they stick to Adam Kendon's definition: 'pointing gestures are regarded as indicating an object, a location or a direction'.<sup>50</sup> However, A. Kendon adds that Calbris 'suggests that one designates another person with the forefinger 'in order to command or accuse'',<sup>51</sup> and this is exactly what the twin does by using his right forefinger. The scene presented in Figure 12 occurs when two women enter the apartment and one of them declares with surprise: 'The children are naked Delhia! Where did Angela got such filthy habits?!' [00:05:32]. By pointing at Angela and pronouncing 'Mommy', one of the twins accuses his mother of being in such a pitiful state. In addition, their nudity (see Figure 12) is in the words of Michel Feuillet, a symbol of innocence and reminds us of 'the beatitude of the first men in Eden's Garden'.<sup>52</sup> By using the gesture of pointing, the little boy protects himself against any accusations, and if the 'bottoms' of the twins 'are sore and [...] always wet and shitty' (McCourt 15) it is their mother's fault, not theirs. Even though they are impure from the outside (dirt), their nakedness proves that they are innocent and pure in the inside.

Body language does not systematically prove children's innocence, on the contrary, if one takes a closer look at the Irish dancing in *Angela's Ashes* and the following remark made by Michel Feuillet about dancing at large, it can be linked with 'evil and perfidy'.<sup>53</sup> The relationship between dancing and perfidy refers to the episode in which Frank uses this activity as an excuse to go out with his friends: 'I tell him I'm finished with the dancing, that I have sixpence in my pocket for Mrs. O'Connor that's supposed to go into the black boy's mouth, that I'm going to the Lyric Cinema instead' (McCourt 89). He betrays his mother's trust by using the money she gave him for the dancing to go to the cinema. Nevertheless, Frank did not immediately use the sixpence for something else than his Irish dancing class, he took some lessons for several weeks before giving up (see Figure 13 below).

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<sup>49</sup> Navarro, Joe. *The Dictionary of Body Language: a Field Guide to Human Behavior*. New-York: William Morrow, 2018. p. 81.

<sup>50</sup> A, Kendon. *op. cit.* p. 200.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> M, Feuillet, *op. cit.* Translated by the author : « La nudité, symbole d'innocence, rappelle la béatitude des premiers hommes dans le jardin d'Eden », p. 79.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author : « Malgré cette apparente innocence, la danse [...] est liée au mal et à la perfidie », p. 41.



Figure 13: Irish dancing [00:51:05]

In the above shot Frank can be rapidly identified for he is the only child who seems to struggle with dancing. He is the penultimate, the boy who looks at the feet of his classmate to imitate the movements. In this shot, Frank looks like an interloper for he does not reproduce the same gestures as the rest of the group, indeed, his left leg is put in front of him whereas it should be positioned behind. Here, dancing works as an indicator of false innocence.

The meaning of *innocence* is close to simplicity especially when humour comes into play. ‘Humour’ is defined as references to action, speech, writing, etc.: [having] the quality of being amusing, the capacity to elicit laughter or amusement’,<sup>54</sup> so that humour can also be studied in relation to incongruity in the sense of inappropriateness. These last two qualities are particularly visible in the presence of a child who is disconnected from reality due to a lack of experience in life. A child’s simplicity is hilarious because of that very absence of knowledge acquired through time that often leads him to make funny and improper remarks at a precise moment. As Martin and Ford noted: ‘the essence of humour seems to be incongruity, unexpectedness and playfulness’.<sup>55</sup> It is this disconnected relationship between what a child thinks and the

<sup>54</sup> See: ‘Humour | humor, n.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 21/03/2021.

<sup>55</sup> Martin, Rod A and Ford, Thomas. *The Psychology of Humour: An Integrative Approach*. San Diego: Elsevier Science & Technology, 2018. p. 6.

reality which is at the basis of humour. That lack of experience in life makes children understand something in its literal sense and it suddenly makes the audience laugh, as in the following example: ‘Pa Keating laughs, I think I’ll keep this little fella. Malachy runs to him. No, no, no. That’s my brother, that’s Eugene. And I say, No, no, no, that’s our brother’ (McCourt 49). What renders this passage funny is the fact that Frank and his brother Malachy jr. took what their uncle said, seriously. Their uncle Pa only meant that Eugene was a cute little boy that he likes, and he was only joking while saying he would keep him. However, the two brothers are too young to understand that Pa Keating was making off-beat humour, and this unveils their innocence. They immediately reacted and defended their little brother.



Figure 14: Frank's reaction [00:16:26]

This medium shot reveals how seriously Frank has understood his uncle’s remark. He frowns which means he is upset and angry about what he has just heard. He stares at his uncle as if he were ready to fight with him. It is that over-reaction that makes the viewer laugh.

Another example of Frank’s misunderstandings occurs when his mother tells him that ‘this baby is the spitting image of [his] sister who died’ (McCourt 63), then, he wants ‘to know if the baby will be spitting’ (McCourt 63). Once again, Frank did not correctly understand the locution but took it in its literal sense.

Another form of humour happens when children are too direct and honest about a situation. In *Angela's Ashes*, when the mother is asked what name she decided to give to the new born she has just brought into the world and she answers 'Alphonsus Joseph', Frank instantly retorts: 'That's a stupid name' in both the book (McCourt 115) and the film [01:00:27]. By doing so, Frank unconsciously 'push[es] boundaries'.<sup>56</sup> In fact, when Jeni Mawter notices that 'kids are testing out where they stand in relation to the world and are out to press buttons and push boundaries'<sup>57</sup>, it can be applied to the young boys of the story.

Religion is not to be left out even when humour is concerned. It is both a serious and complex topic especially when it needs to be explained to innocent young children. With this in mind, the following example illustrates the feelings of ignorance and innocence: 'Mam tells us, that's the Baby Jesus, the Infant of Prague, and if ye ever need anything pray to Him. Malachy says, Mam, could I tell Him I'm hungry, and Mam puts her finger to her lips' (McCourt 32) [00:11:51]. In this passage, Malachy's question is relevant and justified for he is hungry, and he has just been told that if he needs anything, apparently, Jesus will help him. However, the reality does not work that way, his request cannot be granted, but he is too young to know it. What makes the public laugh here is the unpredictability of Malachy's remark, in fact, humour 'relies on surprise'.<sup>58</sup> Using humour hides a truth, as T.S Eliot said 'humour is a way of saying something serious', it goes further than making someone laugh and this is exactly what the next example wants to prove. After a series of tragic deaths in the McCourt family, Malachy pronounces this monologue: 'Please, God, don't let Malachy and me and the rest of us...be taken off in the box for the hole in the ground. Or even Aunt Aggie or Mr. Benson at Leamy's School. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Toast' [00:25:15]. One must keep in mind that this scene only appears in the movie, hence the absence of comparison with the book. The seriousness of the words uttered contrast with the ending of the prayer once the phrase 'Holy Toast' is pronounced.

Frank might still be a kid, and despite his young age, he is frightfully aware of the successive deaths that have recently happened in his family. He is conscious of the fact that he might even be in danger himself. The shot below (Figure 15) reveals the seriousness and the sudden understanding of the situation, and this is due to several factors. The lighting plays an important

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<sup>56</sup> Mawter, Jeni. *Humour in Literature: Why Gross Works for Kids?* Source: <https://www.jenimawter.com/wp-content/uploads/Humour-in-Literature.pdf> Accessed 13/06/2021. p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12.



role because the absence of light around Frank makes his pupils shine, as if God were listening to him. It also put the emphasis on the gloomy environment he is surrounded by. There is a form of humour through the simplicity with which Frank talks about death without mentioning the word in question but by using a periphrasis instead. It definitely proves his innocence. The spectator feels guilty for laughing at such a tragic moment especially when the adverb ‘even’ is uttered. Although Frank does not like his schoolmaster Mr. Benson, nor his Aunt Aggie very much, he does not want them to ‘be taken off in the box for the hole in the ground’ because he knows how painful it is to lose someone. Thus, he prays for them, for their lives. He speaks with a dramatic tone, but eventually succeeds in making the audience laugh at the end of his prayer while pronouncing ‘Holy Toast’ instead of ‘Holy Ghost’. This mistake tends to tone down the harsh world he lives in and to include an atmosphere of tragic comedy, such comic elements lightening up the overall tragic mood of the family’s fate.



Figure 15: Frank's prayer [00:25:15]

Children are pure through their simplicity, humour and their innocence. They express themselves with an astonishing simplicity and truthfulness, hence the notion of purity.

Purity is a concern in the original text as well as in the film, to the point that it might be fruitful to examine how it also created tensions at a metadiegetic level, and in particular for the screenwriter and director of the adaptation, who were creating or recreating the same story through a new medium, based on sounds and images rather than words and sentences written on paper. Could such work be considered as 'pure'?



### 3. ABOUT THE (IM)PURITY OF CINEMATOGRAPHIC ADAPTATION

[Adaptation is] the transfer of an ‘original’ (literary) text from one context of production to an (audio-visual) other.<sup>59</sup>

The above quotation is the most objective definition of ‘adaptation’ found through our numerous readings. In the words of Linda Hutcheon, it is a ‘process of creation and reception’<sup>60</sup> for there is a constant series of actions between the original version and the target medium. A key notion that must not be forgotten throughout the forthcoming analysis is that of reality. In fact, the more realist a text is, the easier it is for the producer to reproduce a faithful cinematographic adaptation of the book. By ‘realism’, one refers to the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition: ‘especially in reference to art, film, and literature: close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering the precise details of the real thing of scene’.<sup>61</sup> The main question that will dominate this subpart is related to the (im)purity of screen adaptation and more precisely, is *Angela’s Ashes* a pure or impure adaptation of McCourt’s work?

Coming back to the notion of reality mentioned earlier, some generalities contributing to the impression of realism are worth focusing on before having a closer look at what Roland Barthes called ‘reality effect’. The use of the first-person narrator adds a certain realism for the reader can identify with the persona. The book opens on the following sentence: ‘My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married, and where I was born’ (Mccourt 1); whereas the movie starts at the second paragraph of the book: ‘When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all’ (Mccourt 1). Besides, there is a correlation between the voice-over and the point of view shots in the movie. These two elements take part in the process of realism and identification.

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<sup>59</sup> Giddings, Robert and Sheen, Erica. *The Classic Novel: from Page to Screen*. Manchester: Manchester university press, 2000. p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. London: Routledge, 2006. p. xvi.

<sup>61</sup> See: ‘Realism, n.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 28/03/2021.



Figure 16: Point of view shot (a) [01:33:05]



Figure 17: Point of view shot (b) [01:33:08]

Above are two of the most powerful point-of-view shots present in the movie; indeed, Figure 17 shows the spectator what Frank sees at that precise moment, he stands close to the wall as proves Figure 16 and this is why one knows it is his point of view. This tunnel is to be understood in a symbolic way, especially the dark section. It depicts the ups and downs Frank and his family had to go through because of his father's alcoholism. From that moment on, his father leaves the house and never returns. He takes away all the problems he caused to his family in his briefcase. The chiaroscuro is to be interpreted as an alternation between happy (well lit) and hard (dark) moments. The light at the end of the tunnel is a symbol of hope, of a pure life ahead. The fact that there is light where Frank stands means that now that his father has left home, he is ready to live in a peaceful environment.

Time has come to focus on Roland Barthes' 'reality effect' that Ian Buchanan defines as 'The small details of person, place, and action that while contributing to the narrative, give the story its atmosphere, making it feel real'.<sup>62</sup> The central matter here concerns the details that contribute to the understanding of a character or an environment. Barthes asserts that details are not insignificant but precise indicators of a character's personality for instance. The example that better suits this definition is the episode of the train station with the following description: 'The station is always exciting with all the coming and going, people from carriages, crying, smiling, waving good-by, the train hooting and calling, chugging away in clouds of steam, people sniffing on the platform, the railway tracks silvering into the distance, on to Dublin and the world beyond. Now it's near midnight and cold on the empty platform' (McCourt 172). From a stylistic point of view, these two sentences are in accordance with their meaning, that is to say, the first long sentence has nine commas which creates a particular rhythm because some segments are longer than others. The juxtaposition of the segments through the use of commas

<sup>62</sup> Buchanan, Ian. *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. 1st ed, Oxford University Press, 2010. p. 1095.

speeds up the rhythm, whereas the last short sentence breaks it and contrasts with all the frenzy going on in the previous one. Indeed, the shortness of the second is at the image of Frank's disappointment, the reality is hard to face. It can be felt thanks to the alliteration in /t/ producing sharp sounds and evoking the pain of the family waiting for Malachy sr. to come back home with some money to feed the family. Unfortunately, it will not happen. Angela and her children will desperately wait on the platform which will stay 'cold' and 'empty' (McCourt 172). This euphemism is used to soften the blow of reality, it is a way to say that Frank's father has deserted and abandoned his family.



Figure 18: 'clouds of steam' [01:24:46]



Figure 19: Frenzy [01:24:49]

On the one hand, Figure 18 is a visual representation of the long description proposed by Frank and more precisely the detailed phrase 'clouds of steam' (McCourt 172). This low angle shot insists on the size of the train, revealing its importance. The steam is not an important element *per se*. Nevertheless, it reflects the surreal emotions the passengers may feel when they are about to travel, or the relatives waiting to be reunited. This detail transmits a feeling that we all have felt in our lives. On the other hand, the high angle seen in Figure 19 draws a parallel with the frenzy suggested in the phrase 'the station is always exciting with all the coming and going' (McCourt 172). In these shots the steam plays a key role into the description of a particular emotion that one can identify with.

Moreover, the details Roland Barthes talks about can also be linked with an environment through a special way of filming for instance. In the movie, the oppressive atmosphere is reproduced thanks to the use of a grey-blue filter from beginning to end. It testifies to the sadness and gives the impression of being trapped in this miserable life as it can be observed in the two shots below (see Figures 20 and 21). This coloured filter constitutes a 'reality effect' due to its negative connotations.



Figure 20 : Beginning of the movie [00:00:41]



Figure 21 : End of the movie [02:18:57]

Another detail that may seem insignificant is the description of Malachy jr.'s face throughout the book that Frank describes like this: 'When he laughs you can see how white and small his teeth are and you can see his eyes shine. He has blue eyes like my mother. He has golden hair and pink cheeks' (McCourt 8). This rather long description is not useless at all for two reasons. First, it compels the reader to imagine how Malachy jr. looks like, it paints a portrait of him. Then, it aims at giving a positive and innocent portrait of the young boy. The lexical field of his description is positive and somewhat exaggerated, especially when the term 'golden' is expressed. The soft colours 'white' and 'pink' enhance the innocence of the kid. The shot below (see Figure 22) is the most faithful representation of his description.



Figure 22: Malachy's innocent portrait [00:02:29]

Both innocence and purity are depicted in this close up thanks to his pale face, the whiteness of his teeth and his smile. This is a slightly low angle shot which gives the child a dignified dimension and conveys an impression of purity and playful happiness. Thus, through several examples of three different details, it has been proved that Roland Barthes' 'reality effect' is to be found everywhere in McCourt's book and its cinematographic adaptation. Details are not insignificant even though they may not transmit a clear message, they are part of something larger such as an atmosphere or an emotion, and they are, far from useless.

When it comes to the principle of novel adaptation, the idea that cinema is an impure art was firstly proposed by André Bazin<sup>63</sup> but was later taken over and broadened by Alain Badiou in his lectures. Therefore, in terms of form, there is a lot to be analysed. The frontier between fidelity and treason being extremely blurry, one can quickly be accused of producing an impure version of the original literary medium. As is illustrated by Robert Stam's following quotation, the topic of adaptation is complex for it raises the questions of fidelity and expectation:

A faithful film is seen as uncreative, but an unfaithful film is a shameful betrayal of the original. An adaptation that updates the text for the present is upbraided for not respecting the period of the source, but respectful costume dramas are accused of a failure of nerve in not contemporising the text. If an adaptation renders the sexual passages of the source novel literally it is accused of vulgarity – if it fails to do so it is accused of cowardice. The adapter it seems can never win.<sup>64</sup>

Adaptation is a very sensitive topic, André Bazin even talks about the 'untouchable'<sup>65</sup> characteristic of the work of art, thus, one can wonder if it is due to its purity. More precisely, is an adaptation pure or impure? An attempt at providing – if not an answer – a discussion to this question, will be at the chore of the forthcoming analysis.

*Angela's Ashes* can be considered as an impure adaptation for the filmic version has simplified some aspects in the sense of reduction. Every single scene and its details from a written work cannot be reproduced on screen. As Laurent Mellet writes: 'adaptations reveal what filmmakers consider to be the most salient traits and / or relevant for this public'.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the constraint

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<sup>63</sup> A. Bazin. « Pour un cinéma impur » in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma ? op. cit.* p. 81.

<sup>64</sup> Stam, Robert. *Literature and Film: a Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*. Oxford : Blackwell, 2005.

<sup>65</sup> Bazin, André. *L'Adaptation ou le cinéma comme digeste*. Paris : Esprit, 1948. Translated by the author: « L'intouchabilité de l'œuvre d'art », p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> Mellet, Laurent, Wells-Lassagne, Shannon. *Étudier l'adaptation filmique : cinéma anglais – cinéma américain*. Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010. Translated by the author : « les adaptations révèlent ce que les cinéastes estiment être les traits les plus saillants et/ ou pertinents pour ce public », p. 10.

of time imposed by cinema compelled the producer to omit certain events that were present in the book, whereas a writer is not limited by a number of pages. It echoes Bazin's words: 'the very principle of adaptation [is] aimed at simplifying and condensing a work which wanted essentially to keep the main character and the main situations where the author had put it'.<sup>67</sup> Without going as far as Bazin's remark, it is true that some passages were shortened and simplified. In the book, Frank often talks about 'the Italian grocery shop' (McCourt 15) where he used to steal bananas to feed his starving little brothers. However, the movie makes no mention of that very important episode which aims at understanding the poor living conditions the McCourt family lived in. It is of major importance because every time Frank steals bananas, he feels guilty about it and wonders what excuse he will say to his mother if she finds out. Thus, adaptation raises the question of 'omissions and inventions'.<sup>68</sup> The latter is a delicate one especially in the case of an autobiographical work. When Frank wrote *Angela's Ashes* he surely was as precise as possible, but precision implies subjectivity and eventually unintentional lies in the sense of reality distortion. He did not deliberately lie, but because of the passing of time, his memories might have been slightly different depending on the events. Consequently, both the book and the film might be considered as impure.

The second argument takes the addressees of adaptation into consideration. Some works are adapted for cinema itself and others for a public and this is the issue raised by Bazin when he says that 'it is firstly a matter of knowing to whom the adaptation is made for, if it is for cinema or its audience'.<sup>69</sup> Since *Angela's Ashes* received the Pulitzer Prize one year after its publication and was adapted on screen only two years afterwards, it makes (almost) no doubt that the award influenced its adaptation on screen. Thus, part of the reason why it became a movie is certainly related to money. One cannot know if without the Pulitzer Prize it would have been adapted on screen, but it surely positively influenced Alan Parker's decision. In this regard, it tends to be considered as impure for several factors stepped in when the question of the adaptation was asked.

The third argument concerns the blending of different art forms, and if one goes back to the definition of 'impurity', it precisely indicates that mixture is a factor of impurity. Bazin himself explains that 'if a certain mixture of the arts remains possible, such as the mixture of genres,

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author: « le principe même de l'adaptation qui visait à simplifier et à condenser une œuvre dont elle ne voulait garder au fond que le personnage central et les principales situations où l'auteur l'avait placé [...] », p. 38.

<sup>68</sup> R. Giddings, E. Sheen. *op. cit.* p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> A. Bazin. *L'Adaptation ou le cinéma comme digeste. op. cit.* Translated by the author : « il s'agit d'abord de savoir à quoi on adapte, si c'est au cinéma ou à son public », p. 34.

every mixture does not systematically result in happiness'.<sup>70</sup> This notion of happiness has to be understood in the sense of *success*. Bazin's scepticism about the mixing of the arts in cinema is based on the fact that it borrows some elements from other art forms and the cinematographic adaptation of *Angela's Ashes* is particularly concerned with this because of the presence of the seven art forms. To begin with, is architecture. A lot of buildings are to be seen and illustrate the development of housing in relationship with that of the industrial sector, especially when Frank's father looks for a job, an overview of Limerick's architecture is offered to the viewer (see Figure 23). To continue, a shot of the Statue of Liberty is proposed to the spectator (see Figure 24). Then, paintings appear, and they are all related to religion, and more precisely Catholicism (see Figure 25). Frank's passion for Shakespeare draws a direct link with literature. It is when Frank stays at the hospital for a while that he discovers his fondness for Shakespeare's plays: *Hamlet* and *Henry VIII* (see Figure 26). He also writes a poem and has to read it in front of the class, making his first steps as a writer without even knowing it (see Figure 27). The music of the film conducted by John Williams constitutes the fifth art form represented in this medium. The sixth concerns performing when Frank learns Irish dancing (see Figure 28). Finally, a *mise en abîme* of the seventh art, cinema, is suggested to the public when Frank goes to 'the Lyric Cinema' (McCourt 67) with his friends (see Figure 29). Thereby, each of these art forms present in the film version adds impurity to the adaptation.



Figure 23: Limerick's architecture [00:47:28]



Figure 24: The Statue of Liberty [02:19:39]

<sup>70</sup> Bazin, André. *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma ? op. cit.* Translated by the author: « si un certain mélange des arts reste possible, comme le mélange des genres, il ne s'ensuit pas que toute mixité soit heureuse », p. 88.





Figure 25: Painting of the Virgin Mary [02:07:42]



Figure 26: Frank reading at the hospital [01:07:48]



Figure 27: Frank reading his poem [01:13:01]



Figure 28: Irish dancing [00:51:04]



Figure 29: Lyric Cinema [00:49:42]



It would be too restrictive to focus only on the impure aspects of the adaptation and one would be mistaken by doing so because there are obviously some arguments proving the opposite. The main is about fidelity and this is what Bazin talks about while saying: ‘it is those who are the less concerned about fidelity in the name of the so-called demands of screen, who betray everything simultaneously, literature and cinema’.<sup>71</sup> According to Bazin, thinking about the final version (here cinema) is a mistake. It seems that, to produce a *good* adaptation, one must take the book as a starting point, a basis, something to start from in the case of the film. Leo Ramseyer argues that ‘cinema is not this epiphany of reality, it is a pure representation, just like painting’.<sup>72</sup> The idea of representation also implies faithfulness, but to James Naremore, ‘faithfulness to a form, literary or otherwise is illusory: what matters is the equivalence in meaning of the forms’.<sup>73</sup> It is questionable whether strict faithfulness is real or not, especially in *Angela’s Ashes* because numerous sentences pronounced by the voice over in the movie are extracted from the book without any modification. Some dialogues and monologues are reproduced *verbatim* such as the opening scene of the movie for example. Indeed, by choosing to keep several dialogues the way they were written in the book, Alan Parker produces a copy of the original medium and contributes to the purity of the adaptation. It is that accuracy of wording that is pure. Moreover, a necessary element to speak of purity is the ‘photographic respect of space’s unity’.<sup>74</sup> By ‘respect’, one must understand ‘preservation’. Both the book and the movie take this criterion into consideration. Indeed, in both versions the main places follow a precise timeline. In both cases, the story starts in America (Brooklyn), then moves to Ireland (Limerick/ Dublin) and finally ends in America (New York).

By way of conclusion, one cannot categorise this adaptation in a specific box whether pure or impure because several arguments are valid in both situations. Nevertheless, if purity has to be understood in the sense of faithfulness it would definitely be a pure adaptation for the effort made to stay as close as possible to the book is noteworthy. In fact, a lot of techniques going from the movements of the camera to the acting of the characters passing by the settings are made to reproduce the heavy atmosphere and the main features of the characters depicted in McCourt’s book.

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<sup>71</sup> Bazin, André. *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma ? op. cit.* Translated by the author : « Ce sont ceux qui se soucient le moins de fidélité au nom des prétendues exigences de l’écran qui trahissent tout à la fois la littérature et le cinéma », p. 97.

<sup>72</sup> Ramseyer, Leo. « Louis Seguin et la question du hors champ : une cartographie de l’espace du cinéma ». *Décadrages : cinéma à travers le temps*, vol. 1-2, 2003. p. 110-120.

<sup>73</sup> Naremore, James. *Film Adaptation*. New Brunswick (N.J.): Rutgers University Press, 2000. p. 20.

<sup>74</sup> Bazin, André. *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma ? op. cit.* Translated by the author : « La spécificité cinématographique, saisie pour une fois à l’état pur, réside au contraire dans le simple respect photographique de l’unité de l’espace », p. 55.

## II- THE IMPURE DIMENSION OF OTHERNESS LEADING TO OSTRACISM

### 1. RELIGION: THE ROOT OF OTHERNESS AND EXCLUSION

Catholic teachings seem to have imparted to the Irish a strong sense of sinfulness and dependence on God's grace – perhaps overlapping with archaic concepts of shame, and intensified by historical experiences of defeat and impoverishment.<sup>75</sup>

What if religion was not as pure as one may think? This question will be discussed all along this subpart. It is something that Miller touches upon while using the phrase 'a strong sense of sinfulness'. He alludes to the limits of Catholicism, a moment when religion is on the verge of impurity especially through the notion of otherness.

By 'otherness', what is meant is 'the quality or fact of being other; difference, especially from an expected norm'.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, Michel Prum explains that, etymologically speaking, 'otherness' refers to the idea of binarity. Thus, he concludes that the 'other' represents everything that is not the self.<sup>77</sup> However, the difference in question often leads to a form of exclusion going as far as ostracism. In other words: 'banishment by general consent, exclusion from society, favor, or common privileges'.<sup>78</sup> The origin of the term 'ostracism' is particularly interesting because it corresponds to what some members of the McCourt family have to endure. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as follows: 'In Athens and other ancient Greek cities: the custom or practice whereby a citizen whose power of influence was considered dangerous to the state was sent into exile for ten years; a vote to effect such a banishment. Hence, more generally: temporary banishment, exile or expatriation'.<sup>79</sup> Malachy sr., through his alcoholism and its consequences, corresponds to this citizen having a strong power of

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<sup>75</sup> Miller, Kerby A. *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. p. 117.

<sup>76</sup> See: 'Otherness, n.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 26/04/2021.

<sup>77</sup> Prum, Michel. « Introduction », in Michel Prum, éd., *La Place de l'Autre*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2010, pp. 7-15, p. 7. « Le concept de l'Autre [...] renvoie étymologiquement à l'idée d'une binarité. 'Autre' vient du latin 'alter', c'est-à-dire de l'autre *de deux*, et non l'autre en général ('alius'). Donc ce concept regroupe en un seul ensemble tout ce qui n'est pas moi, ou tout ce qui n'est pas nous. Il oppose deux singuliers, ou alors deux pluriels homogènes, c'est-à-dire simplifiés, indifférenciés, vidés de leur diversité. Dans l'aire anglophone, on parle de 'Other' (avec une majuscule), et on dérive aujourd'hui les néologismes 'othered', 'othering' pour exprimer cette exclusion de personnes hors des frontières du 'nous'. Ce nouveau verbe ('to other') exprime bien l'idée que l'Autre n'est pas une essence, mais une fabrication, qu'il a été ontologisé en tant qu'autre pour mieux être instrumentalisé. On fabrique de l'altérité pour mille raisons, pour mieux se définir soi-même, pour mieux construire l'entre-soi du groupe altérisant, pour rejeter sur l'Autre la faute de toutes ses misères, de toutes ses impuissances... Dire de quelqu'un qu'il est 'un Autre', c'est oblitérer les multiples facettes de sa personnalité ».

<sup>78</sup> See: 'Ostracism, n.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 26/04/2021.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

influence as he is the father, the man of the family who will be taken as a model by his children. The exile mentioned in the definition is to be understood in the figurative sense but there is still a link with him. Indeed, he is rejected by his family-in-law and exiled as he becomes more and more disliked by his relatives. He is perpetually mocked and referred to as a ‘father from the North’ (McCourt 23). Before focusing on his religion, a closer look at the episode of the Tower of Babel in the Bible is needed in order to understand that religion may not always aim at uniting people, but sometimes, through difference, isolate them. In this episode occurring in Genesis (11.1 – 9), it is the notion of language that divide the people. Below is the excerpt from the *Bible*:

{ 11:1 } And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. { 11:2 } And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. { 11:3 } And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. { 11:4 } **And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top [may reach] unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.** { 11:5 } And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. { 11:6 } And the LORD said, Behold, the people [is] one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. { 11:7 } **Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.** { 11:8 } So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. { 11:9 } Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth. (*Bible*)

The two passages in bold are the most relevant to this study. Here, the Bible reveals that people can be divided and here it is from a linguistic perspective. However, it goes further than that for this division finds its root in religion and in *Angela’s Ashes* it lies in Catholicism. What is at the core of the division between Angela’s family and her husband is the latter’s religion. Not only is he the victim of virulent criticisms but hated because of his origin (i.e., Northern Ireland): ‘Dad says he’s glad to see the spirit of Christ alive in Limerick and they tell him they don’t need the likes of him with his northern accent’ (McCourt 44); and his religion (i.e., Protestant): ‘He [Malachy sr.] asks Grandma if she’d mind taking down that statue because he’s a Protestant and he wouldn’t be able to sleep. Grandma barks at Uncle Pat for not telling her he was dragging a Protestant into the house. Jesus, she says, there will be gossip up and down the lane and beyond’ (McCourt 84). The grandmother’s reaction is typical of the ostracism that

Malachy sr. endures for he does not correspond to the norm. Because of his different religion and from that moment on, he will be figuratively castigated. This kind of behaviour unveils a lack of acceptance and tolerance regarding one's beliefs, especially regarding Malachy sr. whose way of speaking also differs from the rest of the family. Indeed, his Northern Irish accent betrays him in a way and owes him a despicable treatment from his family in law. Thus, the same scheme as that of the Tower of Babel is reproduced in the Sheehan family. This episode in the Bible proves that, unfortunately, religion does not always join people together, but, on the contrary, that it sometimes engenders alienation. Even though the Bible praises unity, it seems to be easier in theory than in practice.

Angela's husband and his religion cause a major problem on the side of the Sheehan family as showed by the following example: 'Come here till I comb your hair, said Grandma. Look at that mop, it won't lie down. You didn't get that hair from my side of the family. That's that North of Ireland hair you got from your father. That's the kind of hair you see on Presbyterians. If your mother had married a proper decent Limerickman you wouldn't have this standing up, North of Ireland, Presbyterian hair' (McCourt 79) (see figure 30). In this example, Frank's grandmother crudely insists on the physical trait of her grandson through the use of the demonstrative pronouns 'that' and 'this'. The fact that most pronouns 'that' are exophoric and refer to the extra linguistic reality, insists on the external cause of the cowlick and reminds, once again, that it is Malachy's fault because of his origins. Besides, the ternary rhythm ending the last sentence creates a nagging effect indicating both the disappointment and anger of the grandmother towards her daughter Angela. To her, Catholicism is central to the life of the Irish and she cannot consent to accept a Protestant in her house. Eagleton argues that the reason for this may be that 'since the decline of the Irish language, Catholicism has become the single most important mark of Irish identity',<sup>80</sup> hence the difficulty of understanding.

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<sup>80</sup> T, Eagleton, *op. cit.* p. 87.



Figure 30: Frank's hair [00:46:19]

This harassment could be qualified as ‘racism’ in Bryan Fanning’s sense. He explains that ‘the term racism can also be used to describe a tendency to portray the cultures and ways of life of minority ethnic groups as inferior or as threatening to those of majority groups in society’.<sup>81</sup> By living with Angela’s relatives, Malachy sr. has to face a different culture and most importantly, a different religion. He is part of that ‘minority’ mentioned by Fanning and suffers the consequences which owes him not only to be put aside but to be victim of searing criticisms by his family-in-law too. One must be very careful with the use of the word racism because here, it is exclusively to be understood according to Fanning’s definition: ‘[Racism] is used to describe negative attitudes and practices towards persons because of their membership of groups perceived to differ in physical or cultural characteristics from the perceiver’.<sup>82</sup> It is precisely that difference that is to be linked with impurity.

Religion also intervenes when it comes to marriage and reveals a conflict between true love and imposed restrictions. Before the analysis of the next example, it must be kept in mind that marriage must come before giving birth. However, it is not the case for Frank’s parents as he explains ‘I tell him about the marriage certificate, how Billy Campbell said it has to be nine

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<sup>81</sup> Fanning, Bryan. *Immigration and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. p. 12.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

months, but I was born in half the time and would he know if I was some class of a miracle. Naw, he says. You're a bastard. You're doomed. You don't have to be cursing me, Mikey. I'm not. that's what they call people who aren't born inside the nine months of the marriage, people conceived beyond the blanket' (McCourt 162). This example in free direct speech echoes a passage from the Bible which also justifies the impurity of the act 'Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me' (Psalm 51:5). The term 'bastard' is extremely strong and filled with negative connotations. As a result, it seems that Frank is condemned to some irreversible fate. Indeed, the definitions provided for this term refer to 'a person conceived and born out of wedlock; an illegitimate child'.<sup>83</sup> Considering that it constitutes a sin, a link with the notion of impurity can be established. Besides, it is explicitly expressed in the definition that a 'bastard' is 'something which is of mixed or adulterated quality or nature, or of unusual size or shape for its kind'.<sup>84</sup> Not only is there a link with impurity due to the idea of sinfulness and mixing but with racism as seen earlier for bastard can also mean 'one considered to be an inferior example of its kind'.<sup>85</sup> The idea of inferiority mentioned in the previous quote is echoed in Philippa Levine's words 'Women who had children out of wedlock, sexually active teenage girls, and women sex workers were likely to be classified as feeble-minded, their "unrespectable behaviour proof of their diminished capacity"'.<sup>86</sup> Thus, by associating Frank with the term 'bastard', he and his family at large, are referred to as impure entities.

There is indeed a link between sexuality and religion. In the book, Frank narrates: 'Mam says, Alphie is enough. I'm worn out. That's the end of it. No more children. Dad says, The good Catholic woman must perform her wifely duties and submit to her husband or face eternal damnation. Mam says, As long as there are no more children eternal damnation sounds attractive to me. (McCourt 136-137). Below is the corresponding shot of the scene:

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<sup>83</sup> See: 'Bastard, n., adj., and adv.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 23/04/2021.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Levine, Philippa. *Eugenics: a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. p. 41.



Figure 31: Angela's refusal [01:16:14]

Here, Malachy almost obliges his wife to have intercourse. He tries to intimidate her by using Catholic principles regarding the religious duty to have children sealing the wedding lock and by saying that if she refuses, not only is she a bad Catholic woman, but she will face 'eternal damnation'. Malachy warns her that she might be excluded from the 'good'. In this shot, he overlooks her, meaning that he has power over her, but she eventually refuses. Since they are a couple and as it is written in the Bible, her 'duty of marriage' (Exodus 21:10) forces her to do as she is told for two reasons. The first one concerns her social position as a wife and the other being related to religion. Figure 31 portrays Angela as a fragile woman, trying to avoid any eye contact as if she were afraid of what her husband has just told her. It echoes another passage of the book: 'Mam says she's sure God is good for someone somewhere but He hasn't been seen lately in the lanes of Limerick' (McCourt 90). God's beneficence is put into question by a Catholic woman, and this is a sign that religion might not always reflect peace and unity even in the circle of its believers. Religion constitutes one factor of otherness leading to ostracism but the question of immigration and its close relationship with eugenics is another one.

## 2. EUGENICS AND THE QUESTION OF IMMIGRATION

In Anglophone countries with high immigration rates (e.g., Britain, Canada, and the United States), eugenics became a tool for racially specific migration controls and led to a growing attention to mental and intellectual capacity.<sup>87</sup>

Purity and eugenics are intermingled notions for the latter is ‘the arrangement of human reproduction in order to increase the proportion of characteristics regarded as desirable or to reduce the proportion regarded as undesirable within a population or the species as a whole’.<sup>88</sup> In other words, eugenics is a quest for racial purity. Besides, Philippa Levine adds the principle of hygiene to the notion of purity: ‘The term race hygiene, used mostly in Europe in the early twentieth century, was synonymous with eugenic’.<sup>89</sup> In her book entitled *Eugenics: a Very Short Introduction*, she traces back the origins of the term *eugenics* explaining that it is derived from the Greek and that it originally meant ‘well-born’. Without going as far as talking about the Aryan race and Eugenism as a political movement,<sup>90</sup> the link between *Angela’s Ashes* and the concept of eugenics is nevertheless undeniable. Immigration is central to this notion because the McCourt family constantly feels out of place wherever they are. Even though Frank’s parents met in New-York, Angela is Irish, and her husband comes from Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, when they come back to Ireland due to the Great Depression (1929-1939) and its economic and social damages, the family is not received with open arms. At school, Frank and his brother Malachy were subjected to teasing from their classmates: ‘The boys at Leamy’s want to know why we talk like that. Are ye Yanks or what? And when we tell them we came from America they want to know, Are ye gangsters or cowboys?’ (McCourt 47). Here otherness is related to two stereotypes derived from American films, in which men were either cowboys or gangsters. Thus, as they immigrated to Ireland, these boys mirrored these clichés to their classmates. In this case, it makes no doubt that immigration is the root of the problem and it was a common situation because ‘immigrants were frequently identified as a eugenic problem’.<sup>91</sup> If immigration was seen as a problem it is because it implies a mix, a blending of different races, cultures, beliefs and so on and so forth; the opposite of what eugenics looks for

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<sup>87</sup> P, Levine, *op. cit.* p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> See: ‘Eugenics, n.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 26/04/2021.

<sup>89</sup> P, Levine, *op. cit.* p. 72.

<sup>90</sup> Susanne, Charles. ‘Eugenics and eugenism’. *Global Bioethics*, vol. 10, 1997. p. 10:1-4, 101-110. ‘Eugenism is the political movement, which estimated that eugenics could ameliorate the qualities of “race”. This idea, that the gene pool of the human species could be ameliorated, is not new and is even part of the history of our nations. It is on the United States that, between 1900 and 1930, eugenism found its first socio-political successes’, p. 101.

<sup>91</sup> P, Levine, *op. cit.* p. 109.



would eventually happen, that is to say, breaking the eventual purity of a race. Children are not the only victims of such behaviour. In fact, as Frank recounts, his mother is too: ‘They say, Lord above, would you listen to the little Yankees, and they wonder why Mam in her American coat would be looking for charity since there’s hardly enough for the poor people of Limerick without Yanks coming over and taking the bread out of their mouths’ (McCourt 36). Angela is firstly recognised due to the redness of her coat which is an eye-catcher. As Michel Pastoureau explains ‘the colour red is a proud one, full of ambitions and thirsting for power, a colour which wants to be seen’.<sup>92</sup> It is something that everyone has noticed about Angela: ‘He turns to Mam, he wants to know where she got that fine red coat’ (McCourt 38). The Saint Vincent de Paul Society looks for a tiny detail so as not to give a penny to the McCourt family. Angela even needs to prove that her coat is not new but that ‘a cousin gave her that coat in Brooklyn’ (McCourt 36) (see Figure 32).



Figure 32: Angela's coat [00:28:05]

<sup>92</sup> M, Pastoureau, D, Simonnet. *Les Couleurs expliquées : en images. op. cit.* Translated by the author : « le rouge est une couleur orgueilleuse, pétrie d'ambitions et assoiffée de pouvoir, une couleur qui veut se faire voir », p. 39.

As mentioned earlier, Malachy sr.'s origin is a sensitive subject in the family, it is something used at every opportunity by the Sheehan family as exemplified by these words uttered by Delia: 'A mouth like a sewer, and no wonder with a father from the North' (McCourt 23) [00:05:49]. Once again, it is that difference, that impurity added to the original pure Irish blood that disturbs Angela's family because this difference is not only to be felt in blood but in Irish language too. Eagleton reminds the reader that 'The Irish language [...] was a badge of shame associated with poverty and ignorance'.<sup>93</sup> It is particularly the case for those having a recognisable accent – not only Irish – because they are being ridiculed and put in a shameful position every time it is brought back up to their minds. This is particularly valid in the case of Malachy sr. and his Northern Irish accent despised by his family in law.

Another assessment that can be applied to the McCourt family is that the 'population has this tendency to increase beyond the means of subsistence'.<sup>94</sup> It was an expression of disapproval often heard at the time of the Great Famine and it is here a reproach that is often made to Angela by four women of her own family: 'To make matters worser we think she's expecting again and that's too much altogether. The minute she losses one child there is another on the way' (McCourt 24). A link can be established between the miserable conditions of life of the McCourt family and the fact that Angela keeps being pregnant. Even though it seems paradoxical, Levine's observation gives the following explanation: 'One of the most potent concerns was that the educated classes were less fertile than those low on the social scale, a phenomenon sometimes dubbed the 'Darwinian paradox' in that the least successful in the population were reproducing the most'.<sup>95</sup> The notion of eugenics intervenes on the side of Angela's family telling her to stop having babies 'no more children, Angela' as said Philomena (McCourt 7). It is that will to 'prevent reproduction'<sup>96</sup> like a process of selection, that fixes the notion of eugenics in *Angela's Ashes*. On a more historical approach, a parallel can be drawn with Malthusianism, a theory arguing 'that the world population tends to increase faster than the food supply with inevitable disastrous results unless natural restrictions, such as war, famine, and disease, reduce the population of the increase is checked by moral restraints'.<sup>97</sup> That same theory was at the origin of many debates in the British Parliament, whenever the question of helping Ireland out of the Famine was discussed (and especially in 1847). Thus, this remark can be used for both artworks since they depict an identical situation. Indeed, the

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<sup>93</sup> T, Eagleton, *op. cit.* p. 79.

<sup>94</sup> Malthus, Thomas Robert. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. London: J.M. Dent, 1973. p. 6.

<sup>95</sup> P, Levine, *op. cit.* p. 27.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.

<sup>97</sup> *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th Edition. Copyright © 2010 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

McCourt family works as a microcosm of the 'world population'. The cause of lack of food, comfort and money is partly due to the numerous births and deaths of infants of the family. Nevertheless, the family is aware of that major problem as Angela's phrase 'all of us' reveals: 'that's just enough for all of us to starve on. Nineteen shillings for six of us? That's less than four dollars in American money and how are we supposed to live on that? What are we to do when we have to pay rent in a fortnight? If the rent for this room is five shillings a week we'll have fourteen shillings for food and clothes and coal to boil the water for the tea' (McCourt 36). The McCourts are strongly impacted by famine and diseases, especially pneumonia. Despite the 'natural restrictions' such as diseases due to a specific climate impacting families echoing the Darwinian<sup>98</sup> theory about natural selection, other limits are imposed by the Sheehan family's situation.

The fact that they come from America is not easy to live with. They are endlessly regarded as an immigrant family that has no money. Philippa Levine notes three factors central to eugenic concerns amongst which is 'class'. The other two are 'gender and race differences'.<sup>99</sup> The latter has been previously analysed through religion and the Northern-Irish origin of Malachy sr., and now it is the dimension of social class that is about to be discussed through the episode of shoes. It starts with the parents' dialogue: 'The shoes they have are falling to pieces. I can fix them, he says. You can't fix anything. You're useless, she says. He comes home the next day with an old bicycle tire. He sends me to Mr. Hannon next door for the loan of a last and a hammer. He takes Mam's sharp knife and he hacks at the tire till he has pieces to fit on the soles and heels of our shoes. Mam tells him he's going to destroy the shoes altogether, but he pounds away with the hammer, driving the nails through the rubber pieces and into the shoes' (McCourt 64) (see Figure 33).

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<sup>98</sup> See: Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Ockham Publishing, (2015).

<sup>99</sup> P, Levine, *op. cit.* p. 72.



Figure 33: Malachy fixing his children shoes [00:33:54]

Religiously speaking, the shoes possess a heavy symbolism as ‘the master wears shoes; the slave goes barefoot’ according to Christian symbolism.<sup>100</sup>

By trying to fix his children’s shoes, Malachy shows that he wants to escape that hard reality he lives in because ‘wearing a shoe, in comparison with barefoot, is a way to reach a higher humanity, one that dares refusing a direct contact with the earth’.<sup>101</sup> There is a form of denial from Frank’s father who does not want to let his sons go to school ‘shoeless’ (McCourt 65). He would rather let them wear damaged shoes (see Figure 34) and be mocked than letting them go barefoot. Unfortunately, Frank and his brother Malachy will be pointed out by their classmates (see Figure 35): ‘On our way to school Leamy’s boys laugh at us because the tire pieces are so thick they add a few inches to our height and the boys say, ‘How’s the air up there?’ (McCourt 64), an awkward question rendered in the film by a close-up which reveals the details of the boys’ shoes, followed by a medium shot with a slightly high angle which crushes Frank among his jeering classmates.

<sup>100</sup> M, Feuillet, *op. cit.* Translated by the author: « le maître est chaussé ; l’esclave va nu-pieds », p. 27.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author : « Le port de la chaussure, par rapport aux pieds nus, est une manière d’accéder à une humanité supérieure, celle qui ose refuser le contact direct avec la terre », p. 27.



Figure 34: Damaged shoes [00:34:18]



Figure 35: Frank & Malachy are mocked [00:34:14]

One cannot discuss the aspect of social class without mentioning poverty. In 1997, the National Anti-poverty Strategy discussed the problem of social exclusion and included the following definition of the term ‘poverty’: ‘People are living in poverty, if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm from other people in society’.<sup>102</sup> While talking of ‘social’ resources, Fanning touches on the notion of rejection present in *Angela’s Ashes*, especially through Angela’s remark: ‘I’ll tell you what it is, she says. ‘Tis class distinction. They don’t want boys from the lanes on the altar’ (McCourt 93) [00:57:48]. By saying so, Angela points out the fact that her family is rejected from society and this may be due to her social condition for she comes from a poor family. It also highlights the difference of treatment from one social class to another. Figure 36 below perfectly illustrates their conditions of life and especially the miserable environment of the McCourts, suggested by the absence of any food on their dining table.

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<sup>102</sup> B, Fanning, *op. cit.* p. 249.



Figure 36: Poverty [00 :57 :48]

On this shot the only signs of food are represented by breadcrumbs and empty plates on the table. Besides, the oil lamp lets the viewer understand that they do not have electricity. The way they are dressed also reflects their poverty because of the dull and ripped clothes they are wearing. The fact that both actors look downwards reveals a state of emotional pain not to say distress. It is a sign of awareness of the pitiful environment they live in. Finally, the cigarettes they both smoke could be interpreted as a metaphor of life. Even though ‘the fag is the only luxury [they] have (McCourt 67), they burn slowly and are in the image of the family who suffers a lot. The remaining ashes correspond to their inner scars due to the everyday hardships they suffer. Thus, the McCourts and their turmoil embody the debates around the notion of eugenics, which is not only related to their status as migrants. Even if it is the superordinate concept, eugenics has several branches amongst which are poverty and social classes: ‘The vast majority of those whose lives were affected by eugenic diagnosis, treatments, and policies, whether male or female, and of whatever race or nationality, were the less well-off, the less educated, and the less privileged’.<sup>103</sup>

Eugenics, religion and immigration were not the only responsible factors leading to ostracism but nationality also played a role in the mechanism of exclusion.

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<sup>103</sup> P, Levine, *op. cit.* p. 81.

### 3. THE QUESTIONING OF NATIONALITIES: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Many traditional historical and literary studies of Irish nationalism insist on its unique characteristics. Some focus on the unusual mixture of ethnic and civic ideas that have historically underpinned nationalist narratives and practices in Ireland. Others point out the uncommon tendency for Irish nationalism to incorporate both left and right of the political spectrum.<sup>104</sup>

The quotation above is centred on the importance of identity, nationalism, patriotism and more precisely Irishness. It is the use of the term *mixture* that creates a link with this paper's main topic: impurity.

The notion of identity is central to *Angela's Ashes* since both parents are related to the United States of America: 'My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born' (McCourt 1). However, due to the Great Depression in America, they decided to return to Ireland, their country of origin and this, constitutes the first paradox of their lives: 'we must have been the only Irish family to say good-bye to the Statue of Liberty instead of hello' [00:06:32]. Both the film and the novel convey the idea of otherness leading to ostracism: it is thought that 'Angela and the children would be better off in her native land' (McCourt 24). The preposition 'off' implies rejection. 'They [Philomena and Delia] [...] put us on the ship, said Good-bye and good riddance, and went away' (McCourt 25). The act of sending some members of a family away is extremely strong and painful. On a more historical approach, it corresponds to the phenomenon of 'diaspora' in the sense of 'dispersion'.<sup>105</sup> Another parallel can be drawn with religion which reveals its omnipresence in both artworks. Indeed, it could refer to 'the dispersion of the Jewish people beyond the land of Israel'.<sup>106</sup> When the family members moved from one country to another they took a boat which, through the lens of religion, is full of symbolism. According to Michel Feuillet 'for the Christians, the boat represents the Church which leads its believers to Salvation through the tempests of life and the pitfalls of temptation'.<sup>107</sup> He even adds a reference to Noah's Ark in the Bible, and the boat on which all those who embarked were intended to be saved. In an Irish context the symbol of the boat also connotes the journey of St Brendan, also called 'The Navigator' (484-578), who founded monasteries in Ireland and is remembered in an epic tale (*Voyage of St Brendan* or *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*). Thus, the boat could be a religious metaphor of life with

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<sup>104</sup> Inglis, Tom. *Are the Irish Different?* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014. p. 10

<sup>105</sup> See: 'Diaspora, n.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 06/05/2021.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> M, Feuillet, *op. cit.* Translated by the author : « Pour les Chrétiens, le navire représente l'Église qui conduit ses fidèles vers le Salut à travers les tempêtes de l'existence et les écueils de la tentation », p. 77.



all the difficulties the family had to go through but eventually escaped from. The ship works as a breadcrumb trail for the McCourts and especially for Frank. In fact, from the beginning to the end of the book it guides him towards a better future. At the end of *Angela's Ashes*, his life is saved when the boat takes him away from a desperate life in Ireland, which makes it a symbol of freedom as revealed by Frank's posture. Figure 37 portrays Frankie in the very first minutes of the movie, while Figure 38 is a shot from the very last minutes. In both shots, Frank leans forward toward the bow of the boat as if he were craving for liberty, and as if liberty were an object he was trying to reach. Indeed, Figure 37 echoes the famous scene of *Titanic* in which Rose says: 'I'm flying, Jack'. Even though *Titanic* was released in 1997 and *Angela's Ashes* in 1999, without going as far as saying that Alan Parker took his inspiration from James Cameron's movie, with this shot the viewer is inevitably reminded of the most iconic scene of *Titanic*. What Gérard Genette calls paratextuality, changes and becomes para iconicity in the cinematographic medium. One could rightly talk about inter iconicity; a concept derived from Genette's notion of intertextuality, specifically applied to images.



Figure 37: Frank at the beginning [00:06:36]



Figure 38: Frank at the end [02:19:18]

Nevertheless, that liberty he looks for is represented by the Statue of Liberty he is firstly leaving behind him (see Figure 39) and then, meeting face to face (see Figure 40).



Figure 39: Statue of Liberty at the beginning [00:06:39]



Figure 40: Statue of Liberty at the end [02:19:40]



The positioning of the Statue changes from the beginning of the movie to the end of it. In Figure 39, the fact that the Statue is located on the left part of the shot with an empty space on the right means that America is now part of their past life. However, even though the difference might not be striking at first sight, Figure 40 depicts the Statue of Liberty with a slightly different orientation. Indeed, it is now facing Frank and more importantly, both the torch and her crown are shining which can be interpreted as an eventual bright future ahead.

The *tête-à-tête* between Frank and the Statue of Liberty on screen is represented thanks to a cut and a change of shot from one second to another. To do so, the camera shows two close ups, presented as reverse shots, with an eyeline match, which is an editing technique indicating to the audience what the character is seeing, thus ensuring the continuity of the characters' gazes (see Figure 41 and 42).



Figure 41: Tête-à-tête (a) [02:19:51]



Figure 42: Tête-à-tête (b) [02:19:52]

Travelling over water or navigating is omnipresent in Irish culture, and this is enhanced in *Angela's Ashes*. Water operates as a frontier, a barrier enhancing the differences with the locals. Frank expresses something very powerful which clarifies this idea while saying 'If I can't go to America I might as well jump into the River Shannon' (McCourt 193). This sentence hides a double meaning. The first refers to suicide and the second reveals the powerful obstacle incarnated by the river because of its dangerousness as proved by Figure 43.



Figure 43: River Shannon [02:14:24]

The hazardous nature of the river and more generally water, echoes the episode of The Flood in the *Bible* (Gn 6, 5-22; 7-8) that Michel Feuillet describes as ‘the weapon of divine curse’.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, the dangerous nature of the river is rendered explicit once described by Frank ‘My father says the Shannon is a killer river because it killed my two brothers’ (McCourt 130). Despite all this, it is particularly relevant to note that the word ‘water’ is never used to refer to ‘River Shannon’ (McCourt 1). The reason why probably lies in the fact that, in the *Bible*, water is closely linked with the notion of purity, whereas here River Shannon is linked with death, thus, impurity. Indeed, it is Holy water that is used to baptize infants for instance. Besides, Michel Feuillet argues that ‘water is a symbol of life, a sign of regeneration and of purification. All along the biblical journey, water is used as a sign of divine blessing’.<sup>109</sup> There is a certain paradox in the symbolism of water. On the one hand, the Atlantic Ocean took Frank away from the American dream when his family decided to move to Ireland when he was a child. Water and more precisely damp is the cause of impurity for it caused the death of several babies who died of hunger or were too fragile to survive in a damp environment. Humidity, and more

<sup>108</sup> M, Feuillet, *op. cit.* Translated by the author : « l’eau peut être l’arme de la malédiction divine comme le montre l’épisode du Déluge », p. 46-47.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author : « L’eau est un symbole de vie, un signe de régénérescence et de purification. Tout au long du parcours biblique, on retrouve l’eau comme signe de la bénédiction divine », p. 46-47.

largely water, can be considered as impure for they were harmful to some of Frank's brothers and eventually caused their deaths.

On the other hand, water was used to baptise the infants and is consequently pure when used by a member of the Church. It is both a 'symbol of life in essence but a metaphor of human existence from birth to death' too.<sup>110</sup> The positive aspect of water that may be absent in the previous examples is actually present in the following one: 'As we walk down the street to the river we hear the women laughing, tinkling and bright in the night air' (McCourt 235). Here, water does not indicate otherness and exclusion but on the contrary, it is a door to a new beginning, a new life, a new city filled with hope and happiness.

The question of nationalism in the sense of patriotism is also overwhelming in both the book and the movie. There is a certain purity through complete devotion. Several examples can be used such as the name of the school: 'Leamy's National School' (McCourt 46). The term *National* is characteristic of a specific nation. It implies the pride to be a member of that particular countries; but most importantly is the name 'Leamy'. According to The Frank McCourt Museum website, the school's building was erected in 1843 through the generosity of a man named William Leamy who left a large sum of money before dying.<sup>111</sup> This money was addressed to the education of poor Protestant boys. Unfortunately, a lack of money was felt over the years, thus the school became a National School for Catholic boys until 1953.

In addition to that is the phrase 'Ireland's national dancing' (McCourt 90) in which the association of the country's name and the sport reveals a strong sense of pride and proper identity. Irish dancing was part of the programmes launched by the Gaelic League in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was part of the Celtic Revival orchestrated by Douglas Hyde (1860-1949) in the wider context of cultural and political nationalism which was the basis for the Republic to come (in 1949) and for which many Republicans were prepared to die. The ultimate proof of nationalism in the sense of patriotism is one's determination to die for his country. Frank's father makes his sons promise they have to 'die for Ireland' (McCourt 25) countless times throughout the book, and this, especially when he comes drunk at night as described by Frank: 'He has the smell of the drink on him. He has us stand at attention in the kitchen. We are soldiers. He tells us we must promise to die for Ireland' (McCourt 20). Here, lies an ambivalence between purity and impurity because, if one sticks to the feeling of complete

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author : « L'eau courante qui caractérise le fleuve et l'étirement de son cours, depuis sa source jusqu'à son embouchure, en fait un symbole de vie dans l'absolu, mais aussi une métaphore de l'existence humaine depuis la naissance jusqu'à la mort », p. 55.

<sup>111</sup> The Frank McCourt Museum: <https://frankmccmuseum.wixsite.com/frankmccourtmuseum/about-us> Accessed 29/05/2021.

devotion by giving your body and soul to your country, then, one can quite rightly talk about purity. However, impurity is also present due to the context in which these words are pronounced by Malachy sr. Indeed, he is not in full possession of his faculties. Consequently, this lack of sincerity results in impurity. When Malachy sr. comes home drunk this is how he is portrayed in the movie: (see Figure 44).



Figure 44: Malachy sr. drunk in the lanes of Limerick [00:39:04]

The above establishing shot pictures Frank's father dancing in the lanes of Limerick late in the night. The dark shadow renders the identification almost impossible and the interpretation that could be made about this is that the shadow is not who Malachy sr. truly is. It must be understood as the reflection of his 'dark side', a sort of 'demonic' aspect. This shot echoes the third element mentioned by Frank when he describes his father: 'I think my father is like the Holy Trinity with three people in him, the one in the morning with the paper, the one at night with the stories and the prayers, and then the one who does the bad thing and comes home with the smell of whiskey and wants us to die for Ireland' (McCourt 133) [01:09:33].

The question of nationalities is closely linked with stereotypes which is central in *Angela's Ashes*. It was decided that the term *stereotype* was more appropriate than that of *cliché* on the grounds of the definitions provided by the Oxford English Dictionary since the former referred to 'a person who appears to conform closely to the idea of a type'<sup>112</sup> which is the case for each member of the McCourt family. However, the latter meant 'a very predictable or unoriginal person or thing; a trite or stereotyped idea of someone or something'.<sup>113</sup> It is the word 'trite' which poses a major problem because this paper refuses to consider every single person as unoriginal nor ordinary. In the following quotation, Jeffrey Marlett lists some of these stereotypes in question:

For centuries, negative stereotypes of Irish Catholics had been the norm in the Anglo-American world, making the Irish the first and longest lasting 'other'. The traits of industry, sobriety, and rationality that Anglo Saxons felt marked the English and Anglo-American Protestants as the rightful masters of civilisation were inverted into the Irish stereotypes of laziness, drunkenness, and emotionalism.<sup>114</sup>

Unfortunately, all the Irish stereotypes will not be discussed in this subpart, but the emphasis will be put on three main ones, that is to say, alcohol, food and dirt. Starting by alcoholism and using Marlett's word, 'drunkenness' is of paramount importance in both the book and the film. *Angela's Ashes* insists on this aspect through the character of the father. In the first ten minutes of the movie, the problem of alcoholism is touched on. Once the family has landed on the Irish soil, Malachy sr. is immediately judged because of his request for money but 'Mr. Heggarty says he's sorry but he can't be handing out money to every man who wanders in claiming he did his bit [for Ireland]' (McCourt 28). This answer, Frank 's father received it as an offence and this is what finally happened: 'He'll let us have money to take the bus back into the city. Dad looks at the coins in Mr. Heggarty's hand and says, You could add to that and make the price of a pint' (McCourt 28). This remark instantly betrayed the father's addiction to alcohol and the answer he received was direct: 'We're not handing out money to support the Guinness family' (McCourt 29). The irony lying behind this sentence hides a painful situation, a feeling of entrapment that causes uncountable damages to the family. Drunkenness and impurity are intimately linked, for the former is at the origin of a harmful situation.

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<sup>112</sup> See: 'Stereotype, n. and adj.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 11/05/2021.

<sup>113</sup> See: 'Cliché, n. and adj.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 11/05/2021.

<sup>114</sup> C, McDannell, *op. cit.* p. 229-230.



The second stereotype is related to food and more precisely potatoes, which the Irish are renowned to eat. Part of Ireland's history – the Great Famine (1845-1852) – explains this obsession for potatoes because it was 'the most easily prepared traditional Irish food of all' and was the basis of their staple diet.<sup>115</sup> This dramatic historical event is still anchored in people's minds because of its disastrous outcomes. Indeed, about a million people perished and millions emigrated, just like Frank's parents. In his book, Eagleton explains that 'on the whole, the Irish enjoyed their spuds. Potatoes are highly nutritious, with high energy value and low-fat content, so that though the Irish were poorly clothed and housed, they were kept warm by all that turf, and mostly well-fed'.<sup>116</sup> It was in fact true if they had enough money to buy those potatoes, but it was not always the case for the McCourt family. They were so poor that they could not afford themselves a dinner every evening: 'Where's the money? The children are hungry. You mad oul' bastard, did you drink all the money again?' (Mccourt 46). This example reveals that within the family sphere, both alcohol and food are eventually intertwined themes. Consequently, it increases the difficulties and creates a vicious circle from which it is almost impossible to escape.



Figure 45: Frank licks the leftovers [01:50:47]



Figure 46: Extreme close up on Frank's hand [01:59:11]

Figure 45 shows Frank, who can barely be recognized because of the chiaroscuro, licking a newspaper on which there are French fries' leftovers. The fact that he is dressed in black with dark and wet hair makes the viewer think that he is possessed. He puts the good manners aside and takes advantage of the absence of his uncle to eat something. His posture reveals a bestial attitude, as if he were dictated by his primal instinct; an attitude that is also felt in the book: 'I take the greasy newspaper from the floor. I lick the front page, which is all advertisements for films and dances in the city. I lick the headlines. I lick the great attacks of Patton and

<sup>115</sup> T, Eagleton, *op. cit.* p. 51.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* p. 146.

Montgomery in France and Germany. I lick the war in the Pacific. I lick the obituaries and the sad memorial poems, the short pages, the market prices of eggs butter and bacon. I suck the paper till there isn't a smidgen of grease' (McCourt 191). From a literary perspective, the instinct mentioned earlier is reproduced thanks to the epiphora 'I lick' at the beginning of every sentence. It can also be observed on the second shot (Figure 46) thanks to the extreme close up on Frank's hand revealing his craving for potatoes. His hand indicates that he wants to take as many fries as possible, a handful of food as if he were famished, no matter the disasters affecting the rest of the world, here enumerated as if to compensate his own predicament.

The past impacted Ireland's history to such a point that people even make jokes or allusions to these potatoes. An example is that the inhabitants of Northern Ireland are referred to as 'the hottest Irish potato of all'.<sup>117</sup> Food was an important matter in Frank's family and history too. Thus, Frank goes back in time so as to explain that 'there are families that are ashamed of themselves because their forefathers gave up their religion for the sake of a bowl of protestant soup during the Famine and those families are known ever after as soupers. It's a terrible thing to be a souper because you're doomed forever to the souper part of hell' (McCourt 82). This sentence is imbued with tragicomedy. It is both tragic and humorous at the same time because of the simplicity with which Franks renders the dramatic reality, that is, being condemned only for accepting a soup. The notion of impurity is echoed by this sense of tragic condemnation conveyed by the adjective 'doomed' due to the use of the terms 'doomed' and 'hell'. Besides, it can be observed that religion is still involved through the term 'Protestant'. All the notions discussed since the beginning of this essay are intermingled whatever the domain.

The third stereotype concerns dirt which immediately refers to the notion of impurity. Terry Eagleton observes that 'Americans in particular tend to find Ireland unhygienic, inefficient, alarmingly laid-back about smoking and ill-provided with showers'.<sup>118</sup> This observation is valid in *Angela's Ashes* for Frank's mother herself is 'ashamed of the way [the children] look with the dirty old torn shirts, raggedy ganseys, broken shoes, holes in our stockings' (McCourt 147). The shot below (see Figure 47) suits this description. In fact, Frank's ripped shirt reminds the audience of his dirty old torn shirt'. Moreover, Angela's worn out red coat is over her shoulders from the beginning to the end of the movie, it also has holes and is dirty. The candle is the most important element in the shot that is why it is in the middle of the shot. The boys are staring at it for their lives depend on it. Not only does it illuminate the room but it heats it up too. However, the candle on the mantelpiece may not have the same meaning. This candle,

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* p. 129.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10.

even if less visible than the other, could allude to the protection of God. It has the function of an altar candle. Now that Malachy sr. has left his family, Frank is the man of the house, but he is still too young to take care of the family as a responsible father would do.



Figure 47: Dirt and misery [01:01:55]

It is probably because some of these Irish stereotypes were actually valid in the McCourt family that they were quickly judged by their neighbours and immediately mocked and ostracized at school, which is a microcosm of society, referring to both to the private and the public sphere. To conclude, the McCourt family is perpetually rejected and victim of ostracism at several levels. The people around them understand that they are not welcome, but out of place wherever they immigrate. Not only is it due to their origins, but to their religion too.



### III- THE PARADOX OF RELIGION: A CRITICISM OF CATHOLICISM AS A QUEST FOR PURITY

#### 1. THE SCAPEGOAT MECHANISM

Members of the crowd are always persecutors in the making because they dream of administering a purgative to the community of impure elements that corrupt it, to the traitors who subvert it.<sup>119</sup>

This quotation puts the emphasis on the impurity of certain ‘elements’ composing a society and, by doing so, refers to scapegoats. The McCourt family works as a microcosm of society which makes it a portrait of the ‘crowd’ in question. Besides, the notion of treason is of major importance as it is described as the cause of scapegoats’ blameworthiness. Indeed, by mentioning treason, one refers to the historical episode of the ‘souters’ described as followed by Frank: ‘We had soupers in the Famine. The Protestants went round telling good Catholics that if they gave up their faith and turned Protestant they’d get more soup than their bellies could hold and, God help us, some Catholics took the soup, and were ever after known as soupers and lost their immortal souls doomed to the deepest part of hell’ (McCourt 37). This example is particularly interesting as it includes the main idea that will be studied in this section which is the scapegoat mechanism in relation to religion. In fact, this subpart aims at defining the scapegoat principle by tracing its origin so as to answer the following question: to what extent can the scapegoat mechanism be applied in *Angela’s Ashes*?

First and foremost, defining the term ‘scapegoat’ is of paramount importance. The Oxford English Dictionary provides this definition: ‘In the Mosaic ritual of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus xvi), that one of two goats that was chosen by lot to be sent alive into the wilderness, the sins of the people having been symbolically laid upon it, while the other was appointed to be sacrificed’.<sup>120</sup> The next definition goes further by mentioning ‘One who is blamed or punished for the sins of others’.<sup>121</sup> Thus, the former establishes a link with the *Bible* while the latter, by using the word ‘sins’, alludes to the notion of impurity. What both definitions reveal is that religion is ubiquitous. In order to precisely understand this reference to the *Bible* (Leviticus 16.5-11), below is the passage referred to:

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<sup>119</sup> Girard, René. *Le Bouc émissaire*. Paris : Grasset, 1982. Translated by the author : « Les membres de la foule sont toujours des persécuteurs en puissance car ils rêvent de purger la communauté des éléments impurs qui la corrompent, des traîtres qui la subvertissent. », p. 28.

<sup>120</sup> See: ‘Scapegoat, n.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 26/05/2021.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

{ 16:4} He shall put on the holy linen coat, and he shall have the linen breeches upon his flesh, and shall be girded with a linen girdle, and with the linen mitre shall he be attired: these [are] holy garments; **therefore shall he wash his flesh in water**, and [so] put them on. { 16:5} And he shall take of the congregation of the children of Israel two kids of the goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering. { 16:6} And Aaron shall offer his bullock of the sin offering, which [is] for himself, and make an atonement for himself, and for his house. { 16:7} And he shall take the two goats, and present them before the LORD [...]. { 16:8} And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the LORD, and the other lot for the scapegoat. { 16:9} And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which the LORD'S lot fell, and offer him [for] a sin offering. { 16:10} But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make an atonement with him, [and] to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness.

The phrase in bold echoes both notions of purity and impurity and this is due to the presence of the term 'water', which, in the *Bible*, obviously means 'Holy', hence purity. Moreover, washing one's body sends us back to the process of purification studied in the first chapter and implies that it was filthy, thus impure. This ceremony described in the above quotation has given its name to a certain ritual complex: the (e)scapegoat ritual. In addition to that is the use of 'sin offering' through which the sin is defined as being the cause of rejection by religion. This rejection constitutes a way to reach purity for it allows a person 'to make an atonement'; in other words, and from a theological perspective, a 'reconciliation or restoration of friendly relations between God and sinners'.<sup>122</sup> It is definitely a step towards purity that is being made. The goat's symbolism is of particular interest. Indeed, one could rightly wonder why this animal was chosen to embody this concept. Despite its undeniable reference to the *Bible*, the answer probably lies in the symbolic meaning of the animal that Michel Feuillet explains as follows: 'Billy goats representing the damned of Last Judgement (Mt 25, 32-33) are sometimes replaced by goats'.<sup>123</sup> Thus, both goats and billy goats have the same symbolism in the *Bible*. He also adds that: 'the idea of universal sin is associated to the billy goat (not only lust). Billy goats, symbol of evil, are opposed to ewes, symbol of good'.<sup>124</sup> In *Angela's Ashes*, the term 'goat' is used ten times while 'billygoat' is used only once page 223. Nevertheless, as Michel Feuillet argues, there is no major distinction between both words for they roughly have the same meaning and symbolism. There is a striking relationship between Frank, goats and the scapegoat's notion when he declares that he would 'be better off with four goats in a ditch'

<sup>122</sup> See: 'Atonement, n.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 26/05/2021.

<sup>123</sup> M. Feuillet, *op. cit.* Translated by the author : « les boucs représentant les damnés du Jugement dernier (Mt 25, 32-33) sont parfois remplacés par des chèvres », p. 29.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author : « au bouc est associé l'idée du péché universel (pas seulement la luxure). Les boucs, symbole du mal, sont opposés aux brebis, symbole du bien », p. 20.

(McCourt 104), thus meaning that his life would be more comfortable if he were an animal, even of the dirtiest and most despised kind. Here, the preposition ‘off’ puts the emphasis on the idea of separation, disconnection and distance. The sheer principle of the scapegoat is that society chooses one of its marginals and this is particularly the case for Frank in this very situation where rejection is central. A parallel can be drawn with a passage from the *Bible* by Matthew 25, 32-33 (see below) and Frank’s feeling of rejection.

{25:32} And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth [his] sheep from the goats: {25:33} And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.<sup>125</sup>

It is precisely the term ‘divideth’ which refers to ‘division’ in the sense of separation, that implies a reference to the scapegoat mechanism and its Greek origins.<sup>126</sup>

Richard Buxton’s book entitled *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion* will serve as a basis all along the comparison between religion and McCourt’s diegesis, and more precisely, Buxton’s chapter called ‘Scapegoat rituals in Ancient Greece’ written by Jan N. Bremmer. To do so, one must go back in time and to the Aethiopians who, ‘in order to purify themselves, put two men into boats and sent them away over the sea, never to return again’.<sup>127</sup> What immediately comes to mind is the following shot (see Figure 48 on the next page) depicting Frank and his brother Malachy jr. running on a boat sailing to Ireland. The fact that these two young boys stand behind the bars that are taller than them could evoke a certain form of imprisonment, hence the link with expulsion as a form of punishment, and the theme of scapegoat on a larger scale. The boat is a powerful symbol with a close relation to scapegoats which ‘in the romance of Iamboulos<sup>128</sup> were put into boats and of which is explicitly said that they were seaworthy’.<sup>129</sup> It is necessary to put the scapegoats on a ship that will take them far away from a specific place so as to free and purify the land where they used to live; a similar situation is applied to Frank’s family as the decision to put them on a ship in the direction of Ireland was decided by Angela’s cousins when they saw how she was raising her children: ‘Delia says something has to be done about Angela and these children for they are a disgrace, so they are, enough to make you ashamed to

<sup>125</sup> Quoted by Michel Feillet in *Lexique des symboles chrétiens*. Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 2009.

<sup>126</sup> A brief reference could also be made with Jean de la Fontaine’s fable entitled « Les animaux malades de la peste » which also deals with the scapegoat figure.

<sup>127</sup> Buxton, Richard. *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. p. 274.

<sup>128</sup> Iamboulos was a Greek author as indicated by the following website on page 169: [https://archive.org/stream/K.A.NilakantaSastriBooks/K.%20A.%20Nilakanta%20Sastri/Age-Of-The-NandasAnd-Mauryas-Ed1st\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/K.A.NilakantaSastriBooks/K.%20A.%20Nilakanta%20Sastri/Age-Of-The-NandasAnd-Mauryas-Ed1st_djvu.txt) Accessed 13/06/2021.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* p. 288

be related. A letter has to be written to Angela's mother' (McCourt 24). They were dirty and starving, hence the link with impurity. Thus, it became necessary for the cousins to deport the McCourt family as if they were a contagious disease that could infect them. By forcing them to leave America, Angela's cousins implement a process of purity.



Figure 48: Frank and Malachy jr. on a boat [00:06:28]

Disease and scapegoat are intertwined themes as revealed by Bremmer's remark: 'However, not only girls sacrificed themselves. In Euripides' tragedy *Phoenissae*, it is the voluntary death of Creon's son Menoceus which saves the city from catastrophe'.<sup>130</sup> As surprising as it may be, the matter of interest concerns the first sentence in which the reader learns about girls' death and sacrifices. The female character that one might think of while reading this, is Frank's first love named Theresa Carmody whom he met when he was postman. 'Sometimes [she] answers the door. She has the consumption and they're afraid of catching it from her' (McCourt 208). Her death was a relief for some part of the population of Limerick, and postmen in particular, who were not afraid of delivering any letter at her mother's house after that. There is, indeed, a total rejection of this young girl from the society. She lives secluded and makes the public think of Rapunzel.

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* p. 274.



Figure 49: Theresa Carmody or Rapunzel [01:55:48]

As she opens the front door, she appears with a very dark background which evokes loneliness and entrapment. She seems to be stuck in her house and her look reveals that she rarely sees people from the outside world. She looks surprised with her mouth slightly open. The viewer is deprived of a full shot of Theresa, but a part of her face is also hidden. All these elements make the public understand that a lot of things are unsaid and hidden. The colour of the door and its frame is not to be forgotten, especially as the frame within the frame enhances the sense of entrapment here: within the shot, within the house and within the opening of the door.

The girl wears a green dress, a significant colour as green usually represents Irishness just like the red shade of her hair. Colours are extremely powerful, and their symbolism can be strong. Redness is linked with the notion of scapegoat through a recurring object present in both artworks: Angela's coat (see Figure 50 on the next page), already mentioned in the second subpart of chapter two. Before being qualified as a scapegoat, someone must distinguish himself from the norm. This is due to that difference, the fact that someone is remarkable, that he or she, then becomes a scapegoat. However, it is not as obvious and easy as it seems because like every single colour, its meaning is ambivalent, and redness does not go against the rule. Michel

Pastoureau distinguishes the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ red. To him, ‘the good blood red, that of the Christ who died on the cross [is] a life-saving and redeemer blood’.<sup>131</sup>



Figure 50: Angela's red coat [00:50:48]

This coat accompanies Angela all along the movie. She is the only person to wear bright colours and, as expressed in Chapter two, it owes her a remark from the members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society when she goes begging. This is probably from that moment on that she became excluded from both the public and the private sphere. This is how she started being a victim, a scapegoat.

In addition, cinema has often resorted to the red colour to single out characters which are going to be sacrificed. There is indeed a degree of inter iconicity with Spielberg's block buster *Schindler's List*, released in 1993 or six years prior to *Angela's Ashes*, and in which the only colourful element in the entire black and white movie is the red coat of a girl (see Figure 51),<sup>132</sup> seen once at the beginning of the story, and then seen for the second and last time at the end, its owner having disappeared in the cruel massacres implied by the Shoah. From that moment

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<sup>131</sup> M, Pastoureau, D, Simonnet. *Les Couleurs expliquées : en images. op. cit.* Translated by the author : « Le bon rouge sang, celui du Christ mort sur la Croix, un sang salvateur et rédempteur », p. 42.

<sup>132</sup> Source of the image: <https://actualites.ecoledeslettres.fr/sciences-humaines/histoire-sciences-humaines/la-liste-de-schindler-steven-spielberg/> Accessed 17/06/2021.



on, the red coat becomes the metonymy of her absence and of the innumerable and cruel deaths of deportees, sacrificed in the madness of the Nazi's quest for eugenic purity.



Figure 51: Little girl's red coat in *Schindler's List*<sup>133</sup>

Even though Alan Parker has never explicitly admitted the parallel between Angela's red coat and that of the little girl in Spielberg's movie, he recognised that this coat was of major importance as proved by the following remark taken from an interview: 'In the book, Angela has a red coat which she wears for years and years. We made five copies of this coat for the film. It had to look older and older as the film went on'.<sup>134</sup> The redness of the coat represents the acme of cinematographic *pathos* and tragedy. It is definitely the colour of sacrifice figures. On top of her red coat, Angela's name and status of a stranger constitutes another reason for being a scapegoat. Bremmer writes that 'in the fictional romance of Iamboulos the scapegoats

<sup>133</sup> This image is from the following website: <https://actualites.ecoledeslettres.fr/sciences-humaines/histoire-sciences-humaines/la-liste-de-schindler-steven-spielberg/> Accessed 17/06/2021.

<sup>134</sup> Hancock, Matthew. *Angela's Ashes; the Story of an Irish Childhood*. London: Helbling Languages, 2013. p. 82.



are strangers.<sup>135</sup> Once married to Malachy sr., Angela took the name of her husband; as was seen and consequently fell trapped into political contradictions at the Saint Vincent de Paul Society: (McCourt 149).

And what's your name? McCourt, sir. That's not a Limerick name. Where did you get a name like that?

My husband, sir. He's from the North.

He's from the North and he leaves you here to get the relief from the Irish Free State. Is this what we fought for, is it?

I don't know, sir.

Why don't you go up to Belfast and see what the Orangemen will do for you, ah?

I don't know, sir.

You don't know. Of course you don't know. There's great ignorance in the world.

Angela slowly becomes a scapegoat in the eyes of the men representing the Catholic Church to whom she is asking for help and where she does not expect to be mocked nor humiliated. It is a place where making a distinction between the people on any grounds is, in theory, unthinkable. Yet, because of her name, she is associated with 'Orangemen' and 'Belfast', given that 'Mccourt' has Protestant connotations and thus politically refers to Unionists in Northern Ireland, who were the military enemies of Republicans during the Civil War (1921-1922), ended just a decade before the family's arrival in Ireland.



Figure 52: Angela the scapegoat at the St. Vincent de Paul Society [00:27:44]

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<sup>135</sup> R, Buxton, *op. cit.* p. 275.

This establishing shot portrays Angela standing in the middle of the room with her red coat on, which draws one's attention. The processes of scapegoat and exclusion are particularly obvious as she is the most visible actress due to her position in the room. She stands alone, with a certain distance from the men who have the same posture and are gazing at her. On the right side of this shot a queue is formed by women waiting for their turn, they are all dressed in dull and dark colours and look in the same direction. People seem to be judging her whether they stand in front or behind her as in a court of justice. Consequently, Angela acts as an interloper in this scene. However, the representation of Jesus on the cross seems to be helping her to overcome that painful moment even though the representatives of the Church keep blaming her for her poorly condition supposedly due to her marriage with a man from Northern Ireland, which has eugenic implications, as demonstrated in the second part.

Bremmer attributes poverty to scapegoats while explicitly writing that 'some victims were clearly lower class'<sup>136</sup> which is typically the case of the McCourt family. He also adds that 'in historical reality the community sacrificed the least valuable members of the *polis*, who were represented, however, as very valuable persons'.<sup>137</sup> The term 'valuable' is to be understood in the sense of useful regarding a society and here, Angela's family does not seem to bring any benefit to the Irish Republican cause. Moreover, the family sphere represents a society. It is a form of society that can be defined as a microcosm of society at large. Thus, from that point of view, Malachy sr. was 'the least valuable' – to use Bremmer's words – because he 'drank the dole' (Mccourt 76) and consequently did not bring enough money home to feed his family. As a consequence, he had to leave his house to look for a job in England. This situation can be compared to a form of exile of the scapegoat.

Another comparison with what Brummer says about scapegoats and *Angela's Ashes* concerns the leaving of a society's member: 'Plutarch tells us that cities had special gates for those condemned to death, and for purgations and purificatory offerings. Similarly, the public prison in Athens had a special gate, the gate of Charon, for those condemned to death. The scapegoats, too, will have left the city by a special gate, since at least for Abdera we hear of such a gate, the Prauridian gate'.<sup>138</sup> Abdera was a town in ancient Greece known for its Prauridian gate through which scapegoats needed to leave the society they used to live in. A parallel can be drawn with the last time that Frank's father is seen, as he leaves the house and goes through a tunnel that can be the representation of both gates, that of Prauridian and that of Charon. Indeed, in the

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* p. 275.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.* p. 278.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* p. 286.

sequel of *Angela's Ashes* entitled *'Tis*, Frank announces the death of his father in the very first pages. Hence the link with exclusion and scapegoats leading to a death sentence.

Nonetheless, the stage immediately coming after exile is described by Bremmer as followed: 'After chasing the scapegoats over the border people probably returned without looking back, as was the rule in the case of purificatory offerings. A prohibition on looking back is typical for the moment of separation [...] Persons who are looking back still have a tie with what is lying behind them: the prohibition therefore is a radical cut with all connections with the past. It is, to use the terminology of Van Gennep, a typical rite of separation. By not looking back the citizens definitely cut through all connections with the scapegoat'.<sup>139</sup> What is particularly striking is the fact Frank does more than looking at his father while he is leaving home because he even runs to follow him until he tells him not to: 'I run down the hill and follow him as far as I can. He must know I'm following him because he turned and calls to me, Go home, Francis. Go home to your mother' (McCourt 159). This is adapted in the film by a powerful reverse shot (Figure 53) when his father looks back at Frank, after the camera has followed the boy running from the back (Figure 52).



Figure 53: Frank follows his father [01:32:22]



Figure 54: 'Go home' [01:32:51]

The two sentences pronounced by Frank's father are filled with implicit messages. He does not call his son by his nickname as usual, but, uses 'Francis' first name. By doing so, he marks a separation and reveals that, this time, something is going to be different. Besides, he also uses the possessive pronoun 'your' followed by 'mother' which distances himself from his own family. He could have said 'Go to mom' for instance, but the possessive pronoun 'your' insists on the fact that he has no bonds with his wife and children anymore. All of this is supposedly done to ease the pain that Frank may feel, hence the prohibition on looking at the leaving of the

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* p. 287.

scapegoat. Nevertheless, time has passed, and Frank still thinks about his father as proved by the two shots below:



Figure 55: the passing of time (a) [01:33:18]



Figure 56: the passing of time (b) [01:33:27]

Several years have passed in 9 seconds. There is no transition between the two shots: a long shot showing the tunnel that Malachy sr. went through to abandon his family is simply inserted between the portrait of Frank as a child and the medium shot revealing that he has become a teenager. In the outway of the tunnel, the scene is empty and heavy rain is falling over this metaphorical frontier. Bremmer also refers to Athens, a city where ‘the scapegoats were expelled over the border in historical times’.<sup>140</sup> The situation is quite identical with that of Malachy sr. who then left for England and consequently crossed the border. All along his chapter, Bremmer uses Greek words such as *pharmakos*,<sup>141</sup> *katharma*,<sup>142</sup> *perikatharma*<sup>143</sup> and *peripsema*,<sup>144</sup> which all have in common the notion of scapegoat and could be linked with impurity as their definitions include the term ‘clean’, thus hygiene.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.* p. 288.

<sup>141</sup> ‘A scapegoat; especially one chosen in ancient Greece to atone for a crime or misfortune’. See: ‘Pharmakos, n.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 13/06/2021.

<sup>142</sup> ‘*Katharma*: that which is thrown away in cleansing; the offscourings, refuse, of a sacrifice; worthless fellow. “It was the custom at Athens”, lexicographers inform us, “to reserve certain worthless persons, whom in case of plague, famine, or other visitations from heaven, they used to throw into the sea”, with an appropriate formula, “in the belief that they would cleanse away or wipe off the guilt of the nation”. And these were *katharmata*. Of the same root, of course, are our words cathartic and catharsis, terms originally related to both physical and ritual purgation’. Burke, Kenneth. *Essays Toward a Symbolic of Motives, 1950-1955*. Indiana: Parlor Press, 2007. p. 149.

<sup>143</sup> ‘The price of expiation or redemption, because the Greeks used to apply the term *katharmata* to victims sacrificed to make expiation for the people, and even to criminals who were maintained at the public expense, that on the outbreak of a pestilence or other calamity they might be offered as sacrifices to make expiation for the state.’ Source: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/perikatharma.html> Accessed 13/06/2021.

<sup>144</sup> The three following definitions are clearly linked with impurity: ‘what is wiped off’; ‘dirt rubbed off’; ‘off scouring, scrapings.’ Source: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/peripsema.html> Accessed 13/06/2021.

So as to close this subpart, René Girard explains that ‘it is in all the domains that abnormality can serve as a preferential criterion in the selection of the persecuted’.<sup>145</sup> This is precisely the reason that owes every single character of *Angela’s Ashes* to be mocked, humiliated and to be a representation of the scapegoat character: they are ‘abnormal’ because they never fit in the categories that might have brought them more sympathy: being Catholics or Republicans, without any tie to Northern Ireland, Unionism or Protestantism.

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<sup>145</sup> R, Girard, *op. cit.* Translated by the author: « Et c’est dans tous les domaines, également, que l’anormalité peut servir de critère préférentiel dans la sélection des persécutés », p. 31.

## 2. A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF RELIGION: IN PURSUIT OF PURITY

Films become the modern way of telling parables that relate to Christian values and thus push us to think through the nature of God, the problem of evil, and the question of salvation.<sup>146</sup>

McDannell's quotation uses the noun 'parables' which has several levels of understanding. Firstly, and from a religious perspective, it obviously echoes the stories told in the *Bible*. Secondly, it reminds us of the 'stories' (McCourt 133) told by Malachy sr. Finally, one could think of the text that is written by Frank, his own life which constitutes a *mise en abyme*. Parables are a way of describing the personal relationship between precise characters and religion at large. Besides, the phrase 'personal experience' used in the title of that subpart is to be understood in the sense of the relationship that the characters of the story have towards religion. It concerns their own, personal vision and experience of Catholicism. It questions their vision, practice and thoughts about Catholicism and religion at large. The two different approaches offered by Frank will be looked at, as religion is perceived as both a positive and a negative force, a paradox experienced in the text as well as in the film.

On the one hand, *Angela's Ashes* offers a positive vision of Catholicism thanks to the character of Frank, and by 'positive' one must understand 'hopeful'. Indeed, it is through Frank's eyes that religion appears as a source of hope for a brighter future. It is something that he and his brothers can count on: 'Malachy and I come home from school in a heavy rain and when we push in the door we find the kitchen empty. The table and chairs and trunk are gone and the fire is dead in the grate. The Pope is still there and that means we haven't moved again. Dad would never move without the Pope' (McCourt 58). The ways in which the Pope is described conveys a feeling of peace and reassurance. Not only is he an auspicious figure for Frank, but the embodiment of serenity and calm too. Religion is omnipresent in the McCourt family, it is part of their lives and Frank knows that he can both trust and count on his Saint. It is that presence of religion at a very large scale that guides him like a light in the dark during all the hardships he has to go through. In this specific scene, the Pope whom is pointed at by Frank (see Figure 56) remains on the flooded ground and this is a powerful symbol. Indeed, his portrait is still undamaged which means that religion concretely represents the values of hope and strength.

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<sup>146</sup> C, McDannell, *op. cit.* p. 9





Figure 57: Frank is pointing at the portrait of the Pope [00:31:36]

Furthermore, the ‘rain’ mentioned in Frank’s quotation is not always to be understood in a negative manner and in association to The Flood in the *Bible*.<sup>147</sup> On the contrary, Michel Feuillet argues that ‘falling from the sky and fertilizing the earth, the rain is a sign of divine benevolence bringing life and prosperity’.<sup>148</sup> Thus, even though the rain might be the sign of a dramatic situation – indeed, the damp is at the origin of several deaths in the McCourt family<sup>149</sup> – religion also gives a positive view of it.

Frank sees a miraculous dimension in religion and more precisely in his patron: ‘Then a miracle happens and it’s all because of St. Francis of Assisi, my favourite saint, and Our Lord Himself. (...) I kneel at his statue and beg him to get me out of fifth class where I’m stuck with my brother (...) St. Francis doesn’t say a word but I know he’s listening and I know he’ll get me out of that class. It’s the least he could do after all my trouble coming to his statue, sitting on steps,

<sup>147</sup> M, Feuillet, *op. cit.* « La pluie peut cependant être la manifestation de la colère divine comme le montre le Déluge », p. 89.

<sup>148</sup> M, Feuillet, *op. cit.* Translated by the author : « Tombant du ciel et fécondant la terre, la pluie est un signe de bienveillance divine qui apporte la vie et la prospérité », p. 89.

<sup>149</sup> Here, a parallel can be drawn with the passage when Frank reads the composition he wrote by himself and somehow holds the rain responsible for his brothers’ deaths: ‘This is my composition. I don’t think Jesus Who is Our Lord would have liked the weather in Limerick because it’s always raining and the Shannon keeps the whole city damp. My father says the Shannon is a killer river because it killed my two brothers. When you look at pictures of Jesus He’s always wandering around ancient Israel in a sheet. It never rains there and you never hear of anyone coughing or getting consumption or anything like that’ (Mccourt 130).



holding on to walls, when I could have gone to St. Joseph's Church and lit a candle to the Little Flower or the Sacred Heart of Jesus Himself. What's the use of being named after him if he's going to desert me in my hour of need?' (McCourt 129). The construction of humour in this example is of particular interest because it puts forward the obvious *quid pro quo* between Frank and his Saint. The happening of the miracle seems to be logical as if after all Frank's prayers it could not have happened differently. It is presented as being a mutual aid which softens the miraculous dimension and consequently creates laughter.



Figure 58: Frank lights a candle [01:11:40]



Figure 59: Frank prays St. Francis [01:11:46]

Frank's reliance on his Saint is visible in Figure 58 as he kneels at his feet and prays; his devotion is complete. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that once the miracle happened and Frank is taken out of the fifth class and put into the sixth with his friends, it is a shot of the Statue of Liberty that is shown. Indeed, this is where he found a penny to light a candle in honour of his Saint (see Figure 60).



Figure 60: Frank found a penny [01:11:23]



Figure 61: A miracle at the Statue's feet [01:11:25]

Surprisingly, at that very moment, the fact that Frank finds a penny on the ground seems to be due to the Statue of Liberty, an American symbol here found on the very soil of Ireland. It is a powerful symbol because both the Statue and money are very intimate notions and remind the public of the religious episode of the golden calf in the *Bible*. Michel Feuillet explains that ‘in the biblical tradition, a statue is a sacrilegious manner to pastiche the divine creative act and to oppose an idol to the unique God’.<sup>150</sup>

However, once religion is put aside, another interpretation of this miracle can be linked with America and the American dream. Finding a coin in such an inadvertently manner means that Frank must not lose faith nor in God nor in his dreams. Nevertheless, this conjecture is rapidly rejected because of the medium shot on St Francis’ statue following this scene (see Figure 61).



Figure 62: St. Francis’ shot closes the scene [01:11:29]

The closing of the sequence by the statue of Saint Francis of Assisi suggests that everything that has just happened – the miracle – comes under the jurisdiction of the Saint and no one else. However, the religious approach is not always seen positively, and it seems that, depending on the characters, miracles do not often occur or that religion does not bring hope.

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<sup>150</sup> M, Feuillet, *op. cit.* Translated by the author : « Une statue, dans la tradition biblique, est une manière sacrilège de pasticher l’acte créateur divin et d’opposer au Dieu unique une idole », p. 112.

Thus, on the other hand, *Angela's Ashes* offers a negative vision of Catholicism, and by 'negative' what is meant is 'in contradiction' with what has just been argued. However, the visions of Catholicism proposed in both artworks are not to be opposed, this is why the term 'paradox' is used for the title of the third chapter.

The first element is Angela's critical vision of Catholicism. Her thoughts about religion are rendered explicit in the following example: 'Mam says she's sure God is good for someone somewhere but He hasn't been seen lately in the lanes of Limerick' (McCourt 90). The vague language and broad adverbial phrases she uses such as 'someone' and 'somewhere' convey a feeling of disappointment just like the alliteration in /l/ ('lately'; 'lanes'; 'Limerick'). A lack of credibility stems from this lack of precision and disappointment. According to Angela, there is a discrepancy between God's power and his actions, remaining very abstract. By contrast, the character is being very concrete as she mentions a precise place 'the lanes of Limerick'. God's absence of help is to be interpreted as a loss of hope and faith (see Figure 62).



Figure 63: Angela has lost faith [00:59:23]

This close up on Angela's face shows every single trait and expression. She looks enfeebled while looking downward with a mouth shut and a crisped jaw. Her facial muscles indicate that she has no strength anymore, she even uses her hand to support her head. She looks pasty, on the verge of tears, in other words she has lost faith, as previously indicated.

This perceptible weakness associated to the character of Angela is also present when it comes to blood in the *Bible*. Indeed, the term 'issue' is used all along the Leviticus (15) which establishes a direct link with the notion of impurity:

{15:19} And if a woman have an issue, [and] her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days: and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even.

Blood is related to disease and impurity at large. Regarding women's menstruations, the representation of blood as an impure element is even more enhanced as it justifies an isolation of 'seven days'. So, impurity can be associated with the red colour of Angela's coat and of the blood she loses to give life to her numerous children. Blood can also be seen as a symbol of life. Indeed, Frank is given a soldier's blood which is perceived as a source of strength: 'Sister Rita says, You're getting blood, Francis. Soldier's blood from the Sarsfield Barracks' (McCourt 120) (see Figure 63). But here of course, it is some blood from a man and not from a woman, hence the association with manly force.



Figure 64: Blood and religion [01:05:51]

This shot is testament to the close link between blood and religion as there is Jesus' statuette near the blood pouch. That close connection between blood and religion lies in the definition of 'blood'. In the Bible and theological writing, bloodshed is given in sacrifice, especially the atoning sacrifice of Christ',<sup>151</sup> who dies to save men. A similar interpretation as that of the *Bible* is presented here because the blood bag is used to save Frank's young life. As Michel Feuillet argues, 'blood is the symbol of life, it is a vital principle, it must be respected and spared. Every single human being's blood belongs to God: it contains the soul'.<sup>152</sup> Moreover, Blidstein's following remark agrees with Feuillet's vision of purity in blood: 'In the Epistle to the Hebrews (9:22) blood is also discussed as a purifier rather than a pollutant: 'under the law, almost everything is purified with blood'.<sup>153</sup> Thus, in these circumstances, blood is more a symbol of purity than of impurity.

Despite all this, a paradox still characterises the environment of the hospital and its purpose. There is an obvious duality because everything that surrounds Frank at the hospital is white, thus considered as pure, but one must keep in mind that it is a place for sick people, thus impure. As Figure 64 depicts, Frank is dressed in white and put in a bed with white bedsheets. In this case, whiteness symbolises hygiene, cleanliness (see Figure 65) and most importantly, hope of recovery. Nonetheless, the colour white has ambivalent meanings once associated to a person. In fact, when someone is said to have a pale face, it is not positive because it refers to sickness; that is to say, impurity. In this case whiteness is to be understood in the sense of physical impurity.



Figure 65: Frank in a white environment [01:06:00]



Figure 66: Whiteness and hygiene [01:07:56]

<sup>151</sup> See: 'Blood, n. (and int.).' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 30/05/2021.

<sup>152</sup> M, Feuillet, *op. cit.* Translated by the author : « Le sang est le symbole de la vie : comme principe vital, il doit être respecté et épargné. Le sang de tout être vivant appartient à Dieu (Lv 1,5) : il contient l'âme », p. 103.

<sup>153</sup> M, Blidstein, *op. cit.* p. 78.



After the physical dimension of impurity comes that of moral impurity especially when it is related to temptation, a very present topic in McCourt's work. The personal experience of religion includes the notion of temptation. The *Bible* is filled with references to temptations considered as sins and consequently impure. An example amongst many is the passage in Luke: '{4:13} And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him for a season'. The term 'devil' is not here by chance. It is a prevalent notion that is also found in the definition of the word 'temptation': 'The action of tempting or fact of being tempted, especially to evil; enticement, allurements, attraction'.<sup>154</sup>

In a religious perspective, food also incarnates a form of temptation and, by extension drink and alcohol. Excess of alcohol, in other words, 'drunkenness' appears as follows in the Bible (Romans 13.13): '{13:13} Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying'. The message implied in this quotation is that 'in [...] drunkenness' one is not being 'honest'. In the absence of honesty, a direct link with the notion of impurity can be established and more specifically with Frank's alcoholic father. The latter is described with euphemisms summing up his alcoholic personality. He is said to 'drink the dole' (Mccourt 70) and coming 'home with the smell of the whiskey on him' (Mccourt 12), for instance. The presence of temptation is to be felt using the term 'envying' in the excerpt quoted earlier. It is even more striking because temptation is used in a context where alcohol is omnipresent. Indeed, both alcohol and temptation are close themes and the limit with impurity – that is, an excess of alcoholic beverages – is blurry. Malachy sr. perfectly illustrates this impure phenomenon by not resisting to the consumption of alcohol and consequently falling into alcoholism. In an interview, Frank talks about the 'disease of alcoholism'<sup>155</sup> in reference to his father but explains that he does not 'accept it [the use of the word 'disease'] completely' because one cannot walk away from a disease but 'you can walk away from the drink'.

Temptation places the human being at the verge of committing a sin as proves the apple in the *Bible*, a fruit that often appears in *Angela's Ashes*. Indeed, not only is the apple associated to temptation but once Eve touches it, she commits a sin and comes closer to impurity as expressed in the excerpt from the Genesis below:

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<sup>154</sup> See: 'Temptation, n.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 03/06/2021.

<sup>155</sup> Source of the interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SskmdYBkNs4> Accessed 13/06/2021.

{3:2} And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: {3:3} But of the fruit of the tree which [is] in the midst of the garden, **God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.** {3:4} And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: {3:5} For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. {3:6} And when the woman saw that the tree [was] good for food, and that it [was] **pleasant to the eyes**, and a tree to be **desired** to make [one] wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

In fact, Eve is forbidden to touch the fruit, but the serpent convinced her to do it despite the prohibition. The reason of her disobedience to God lies in the lexical field of temptation: ‘pleasant’, ‘desired’ but also in the reference to one of our five senses: sight. Temptation is intimately linked with aesthetics and appearances. It is because of beauty that Eve yielded to the temptation of the fruit; it is ‘pleasant to the eye’ and the more she looks at it, for her ‘eyes shall be opened’, the more she has chances to succumb to the original sin. As Michel Feuillet notices, ‘an apple can complete the veiled reference to the Fall of man that Christ will lift up’.<sup>156</sup> This remark is particularly valid in the case of Frank and his friend Fintan who ‘stuff apples into [their] shirts till [they] can barely get back over the wall to run into a long field and sit under a hedge eating the apples till [they] can’t swallow another bit’ (McCourt 100). The lack of punctuation in this long sentence added to the repetition of the preposition ‘till’ participate to the creation of a hyperbole. Indeed, this writing device conveys a feeling of suffocation and oppression felt in Figure 66 below. These feelings conveyed by words are rendered explicit once one looks at the shot of the film depicting the accumulation effect produced by the huge quantity of apples held by Frank.

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<sup>156</sup> M, Feuillet, *op. cit.* Translated by the author : « Une pomme peut compléter l’allusion à la Chute de l’homme que le Christ va relever », p. 39





Figure 67: Frank and the apples [00:54:41]

This high angle shot can be interpreted as God's view from above. He is watching Frank committing several sins with his friend such as entering in a private property, stealing milk from his neighbours' cows and so on and so forth. By standing above the young boys, especially Frank, God protects him and will potentially 'lift him up' to use Feuillet's words, so as to extract Frank from his numerous hardships.

To conclude, the personal experience of religion depends on the character of the story. Indeed, Angela seems to have lost faith in God's beneficence but Frank counts on his Saint more than on anybody. Even though Angela is never seen praying, it is the opposite for Frank. Therefore, the approach of the characters regarding religion varies from one character to another, but it is clearly something that they cannot live without, meaning the omnipresence of Catholicism starting with onomastics. A brief focus on Angela's first name is needed so as to understand the link between this precise name and religion. Indeed, the root of 'Angela' is 'angel'. Besides, it does not take long for the reader to notice that Angela is an angel-like, even if she represents the fallen version of the angel who has yielded to temptation but who seeks redemption as she cares for her numerous children the best she can. By doing so, she is constantly trying to reach a state of purity even though it seems to move away as she tries to get closer to it. In the text, Frank narrates his mother's birth as followed: 'And the child was

named Angela for the Angelus which rang the midnight hour, the New Year, the minute of her coming and because she was a little angel anyway' (McCourt 3). Thus, the link between her name and religion at large is clearer. It makes no doubt that Angela has an intimate link with religion because of the double meaning of the term 'Angelus'. In fact, 'Angelus' refers to the ringing of Church's bells; it echoes the collocation: 'Angelus bell'. Moreover, 'Angelus' is also the name of a prayer, hence the obvious relationship between both.

### 3. A COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF RELIGION: A CRITICISM OF THE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION

This affirmation of the value of ritual purity and defilement must also reflect a growing institutionalization of Christianity, the erection of structures which are seen as containing inside them, whether physically or metaphorically, a sacredness which is not found outside.<sup>157</sup>

It is precisely this ‘institutionalization of Christianity’ that will be at the core of this subpart, the institution in itself and its representation. However, the ‘sacredness’ in question will be highly contested as it seems to be only in appearance, at least in *Angela’s Ashes*.

By ‘institution’ the Oxford English Dictionary refers to ‘the established order by which anything is regulated’. Besides, the second definition provided adds some precisions and qualifies an institution as follows: ‘An establishment, organization, or association, instituted for the promotion of some object, especially college, hospital, asylum, reformatory, mission, or the like’.<sup>158</sup> It must be added that such an organisation’s identity depends on the characters of its members and therefore the focus here will be put on the behaviour of the representatives of the Church. It goes from the men working at the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, to Stephen Carey at the sacristy, passing by ‘the rent man’ (McCourt 177) sent by the Church. Paradoxically, all of them embody impurity through their abuse of power and lack of humanity even though they have devoted their life to a supposedly pure cause: religion.

Before analysing the representatives’ conduct, a closer look at the organisation *per se* is needed, especially the Saint Vincent de Paul Society because this is where several humiliations are perpetrated.



Figure 68: Clear vision of Jesus [01:26:18]



Figure 69: Blurred vision of Jesus [01:26:20]

<sup>157</sup> M. Blidstein, *op. cit.* p. 226.

<sup>158</sup> See: ‘Institution, n.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed 31/05/2021.

These two shots above, illustrating a change in focalisation by the camera, reveal the existence of a hierarchical order within the organisation, and this is rendered visible thanks to the blur. Figure 67 depicts Jesus hung on the cross and appears clearer than the man in the foreground whereas he is in the background. However, two seconds later it is the other way around because Jesus is blurry and the man's face is finally revealed. The subliminal message conveyed in the succession of these shots through Jesus' presence is that he is about to see and hear everything that will be said in this room where Angela comes begging. Concerning the cross, Michel Feuillet argues that 'before being a symbol, the cross is, for which Christians, a concrete reality, that of a torture tool, the most important tool of Passion, the gallows onto which Christ suffered and knew death. It is composed of two beams perpendicularly cut; the cross materialises a vertical axis connecting the sky and the earth. It also traces a horizontal line going over the surface of the world'.<sup>159</sup> The symbol of the cross is to be found more or less explicitly in *Angela's Ashes* as seen in Figure 69:



Figure 70: A representation of the cross [00:27:55]

<sup>159</sup> M, Feuillet, *op. cit.* Translated by the author : « Avant d'être un symbole, la croix pour les Chrétiens est une réalité bien concrète, celle d'un instrument de torture, le plus important des instruments de la Passion, le gibet sur lequel le Christ a souffert et a connu la mort. Composée de deux poutres se coupant perpendiculairement, la croix dessine un axe vertical qui relie le ciel et la terre ; elle trace également une ligne horizontale s'étendant au-dessus de la surface du monde », p. 39.

Despite the notion of hierarchy noticeable in the position of every group of characters on the shot – indeed, the men are located down the representation of Jesus but are sat on a rostrum and finally, it is Angela, her children and the begging women standing in the queue that are represented on a lower level – there is a representation of the shape of the cross due to the position of Angela and her two boys standing by her side. Moreover, the chair that is brought behind her will make her stand slightly behind her sons and eventually take the form of a cross. Furthermore, Michel Feuillet mentions a particular material concerning the cross as he talks of wood which is the same material used for the chair brought to Angela, and just like the crucifixion, it is a scene of power and submission which can be observed in Figure 70 where three representatives of the Church at the Saint Vincent de Paul Society are gazing at Angela.



Figure 71: Men's profiles [00:28:08]

This medium shot portrays three similar profiles due to the hooked and Roman nose of these men. This detail is of major importance as it can be read as a sign of impurity. Indeed, a parallel can be drawn with Michel Feuillet's following description about bats: 'Living by night and taking refuge in cavernous depths of a cave during the day, the bat belongs to darkness and hell. According to the Law, it is an impure animal (Lv 11,20). Medieval iconography equipped the

Devil of hooked wings with membranes, similar to that of bats'.<sup>160</sup> Several elements compare in the description and the men on the shot because the representatives of the Church are always pictured inside a building, hence the comparison with the cave. The most obvious element lies in the shape of the bats' wings and the men's noses. Bats are qualified as impure animals, an adjective that can also be applied to these men once their behaviour about Angela is taken into consideration. In fact, she is mocked and humiliated by them when she goes begging for furniture: 'She wiped her eyes on her sleeves and asks the man if the beds we're getting are secondhand. He says of course they are, and she says she's very worried about sleeping in beds someone might have died in, especially if they had the consumption. The man says, I'm very sorry, but beggars can't be choosers' (McCourt 55). The last part of the dialogue 'beggars can't be choosers' is extremely powerful because, by saying so, he affirms and exposes his superior position by reminding Angela of her lower position. He even looks down at her with a haughty look (see Figure 71) which reminds us of the theory of the male gaze, developed by Laura Mulvey, who explains that in many cultural products such as films, women are objectified and observed from a male perspective, enhancing the power of men over women.<sup>161</sup> In addition to that is the fact that he stands on a pedestal like statues in a chapel or Jesus standing above believers.

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<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* Translated by the author : « Vivant la nuit et se réfugiant le jour dans les entrailles cavernueuses d'une grotte, la chauve-souris appartient aux ténèbres et aux enfers. Selon la Loi, c'est un animal impur (Lv 11,20). L'iconographie médiévale a doté le Diable d'ailes crochues à membranes, semblables à celles des chauves-souris », p. 27.

<sup>161</sup> Mulvey, Laura. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. Blackwell: Malden, 2009. Pp 342-352.





Figure 72: Haughty look [00:28:57]

Angela is also laughed at (see Figure 72) in front of a dozen of other women and mocked when she admits that her husband ‘didn’t send [them] a penny in months’ and the men reply ‘Well, we know why, don’t we? We know what the men of Ireland are up to in England. We know there’s the occasional Limerickman seen trotting around with a Piccadilly tart, don’t we?’ (McCourt 148).





Figure 73: Angela is laughed at [01:26:36]

This smile reveals a lack of humanity from some members of the Church, and it echoes Frank's way of qualifying the priests as 'pompous' (McCourt 1) in the very first page of the book which immediately announces his own vision of the representatives of the Church.

Another demonstration of that lack of humanity and consideration occurs when a clergyman slams the door at Frank's face. It is even more relevant since it happens twice: once when Frank is accompanied by his father and the second time with his mother by his side. This might be an insignificant detail, but it proves that it is eventually not a question of gender, neither a man nor a woman has enough power to go against a decision taken by a representative of the Church. Indeed, the scene takes place as follows: 'He knocks at the sacristy door and tells Stephen Carey, This is my son, Frank, who knows Latin and is ready to be an altar boy. Stephen Carey looks at him, then me. He says, we don't have room for him, and closes the door' (McCourt 93). These sentences are composed of three different rhythms imposed by commas. The first is cut into four parts; it is the longest and is pronounced by Frank's father. However, when it comes to the member of the Church, it is brief and concise because the following sentences are respectively made of a binary and a ternary rhythm revealing cold indifference and lack of consideration. These impressions are also felt on screen (see Figures 73, 74 and 75).



Figure 74: Carey's cold attitude [00:57:01]



Figure 75: Malachy sr.'s demand [00:57:02]



Figure 76: Despising look [00:57:04]

Throughout these shots the viewer is immediately reminded of that hierarchical order, conveyed again by the angles of the camera. The low angle shot reveals the superiority of the clergyman and the fact that Frank and his father are impressed by him. This type of angle recalls the power differential between the McCourts and the representatives of the Church. Figures 74 and 75 are points of view shot revealing the way in which each character looks at and considers the other. On the left is Malachy sr. filmed from above. By demanding something that is beyond his control he definitely is in a weak position. On the right, the situation is different because the angle portraying the Churchman announces his refusal and lack of consideration towards Frank and his father's request. Right after this, Stephen Carey closes the door to the boys' face. It is that very action that echoes another passage where 'Brother Murray slams the door in [Frank's] face' (McCourt 186), an act that causes Angela to aggressively say to her son 'You are never to let anybody slam the door in your face again. Do you hear me?' (McCourt 186). That rhetoric question is filled with anger and awareness that the family is badly considered and disrespected by Catholic institutions. It is quite paradoxical because the family is turned down by a supposedly helpful and benevolent institution every time they ask for help.

It is the same institution that helped Angela finding furniture at the beginning of the movie – ‘a docket for a table, two chairs and two beds’ (McCourt 55) – that now evicts her family out of the house that was rented to her. It is interesting to note that the men who are related to Catholicism often appear with a religious sign near them on screen, even if they are not filmed in a religious place like a Church for instance. Indeed, as Figure 76 shows, the man, a representative of the Church, is portrayed with a cross, meaning that he speaks under the aegis of God and that God holds sway over his actions. Thus, the cross works as a reminder of a religious presence, but of a paradoxical nature since some Catholic representatives keep praising the good but do the bad. Their behaviour, as exemplified in the eviction scene, rarely honour the Christian religion.



Figure 77: Eviction scene [01:36:33]

This conflict between the good and the bad, which can be summarised as a duality between purity and impurity, appears on screen thanks to the position of the man in Figure 76. He stands next to a cross and a small statue of the Virgin Mary on the right extremity of the shot. A parallel can be drawn between Figure 76 and a painting by Scottish artist Erskine Nicol (1825-1904) (see Figure 77).



Figure 78: Erskine Nicol, *Notice to Quit*, oil on canvas, 1862, 51 x 69,1 cms.

As can be observed, both images have the theme of eviction as a common point and this is of particular importance in Irish history, which was marked by such scenes, especially during the Famine, when peasants could no longer pay for their rents. Nicol's painting lifts the veil on a sore situation that occurred in the poor districts of Ireland at large. Even though it cannot be seen on Figure 76, the evictor wore a hat before entering Angela's apartment. To continue, the men are similarly dressed in the painting with a long black coats and shirts symbolising order and a higher position in social class. There is powerful contrast with the people evicted whether in their clothes or their posture. The woman standing on the right side of the painting has a bended back and leans forward. The poor man has taken his hat off before addressing himself to the men and by acting this way he shows respect to the people socially higher than him. A *contrario*, the men expulsing the family stand straight with a firm look. This means that the men stick to their positions and will not change their minds. This rigour is to be felt in the man's rhetoric evicting Angela's family: 'Dear God in heaven, this beats Banagher, this takes the bloody biscuit, this is goin' beyond the beyonds. No rent and what am I to tell Sir Vincent below in the office? Out, missus, I'm putting ye out. One week from today I'll knock on this

door and I want to find nobody at home, everybody out never to return. Do you have me, missus? (McCourt 178). In the first part of his address, the evictor uses the plosive /b/ while in the second part it is the sound /t/ that is mostly heard. From a phonological perspective, these sounds are harsh and betray a difficult reality. Both the form and the content of what is expressed create suffering. It is in the image of Erskine Nicol's painting even if one has no clue about the discussion between the characters. The viewer has no other choice than imagining it, but it is undoubtedly a painful ordeal to overcome.

The collective experience of religion embodied by the representatives of the Church is not depicted in a positive manner whether it is in McCourt's book or in Parker's adaptation. Indeed, both works of arts concede that Catholicism as an institution sometimes abused of its power and had some contradictory behaviours that were in conflict with the principles of peace and charity, hence the paradox within it. This paradoxical vision of Catholicism reveals a duality between the good and the bad in the institution's sphere. Nevertheless, one must keep in mind that it is Frank's personal vision that is offered and that it does not constitute the Truth *per se*, but his own truth based on his turbulent experience of religion during his youth.

## CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at proving that the notions of purity and impurity are omnipresent in both versions of *Angela's Ashes* and that they occur against the backdrop of religion. Despite the obvious presence of these notions and their unquestionable duality, it is not as binary as one may think. The principle of dynamism integrated in the title of this Master's dissertation implies an endless movement – and by 'movement' one must understand reflection – upon the limits of the concepts of purity and impurity. This is due to the various shades of a colour or the diverse developments of a theme in both artworks. Depending on the context, some delimitations are clearer than others. In fact, as far as religion is concerned, the *Bible* lays down the law of what is pure and what is not. It serves as a reference and is consequently easier to follow and understand. However, the discrepancy between these notions can sometimes be blurry as they touch upon the questions of ethics and are consequently linked with a specific culture in a particular historical time. Since two different countries are inhabited by the characters in *Angela's Ashes* (America and Ireland), two distinct visions of purity and impurity are apprehended. On the one hand, Americans seem to be less attentive to religion and the duties of a woman in society. On the other hand, the portrait of the Irish is more traditional and rigorous especially towards Catholicism as proved by Frank's grandmother. Her devotion to Catholicism is total, thus, her attitude concerning religion could be qualified as pure, even if it is derided in the book and sometimes denounced especially whenever she subjects her Northern Irish son-in-law to persecution.

In addition, these findings provide additional information about the theme of innocence and its intricate relationship with purity and impurity. Religion sets its boundaries based on sins so as to justify of a pure or impure personality. However, children's portraits are less objective as both the book and the film describe them as innocent. This innocence associated to purity is particularly visible through the person of Frank as was demonstrated in the discussion on the principle of cinematographic adaptation. By directing a faithful adaptation (defined at the end of chapter one, see I. 3), Alan Parker portrayed Frank as an innocent figure constantly trying to reach purity. However, this quest for purity was fraught with pitfalls and challenges starting with otherness leading to ostracism. A perpetual conflict between purity and impurity based on the notion of unity is at the root of otherness and exclusion. The *Bible* refuses any form of blending otherwise it is said to be impure. Thus, eugenism stems from this refusal to mix humans of different origins, nations or religions. A more historical approach focusing on the



questioning of nationalities through the study of the father of Frank and his Northern Irish identity helped creating a correlation with impurity.

Finally, it is that dynamic duality between the two concepts under study that shed a light on a criticism of Catholicism made in McCourt's oeuvre. Such a criticism was rendered possible thanks to an exploration of the scapegoat mechanism which has a historical and theological aspect, a twofold perspective informing the notions of purity and impurity. All along *Angela's Ashes*, that criticism towards religion is to be felt in Frank's narration, expressed by the homodiegetic narrator in the book and by the voice over in the film. Once again there is an ambivalence, a dynamic duality in the religious perception depending on the character. While Angela is described as having lost faith in God, it is the opposite for her eldest son. Each character looks at Catholicism with a different critical eye and this is why their personal experience of religion differs.

Catholicism is also criticised for its various religious institutions that the McCourt family encountered. It is therefore a question of encounter with pure and impure institutions or people which determines Frank's perspective. Thus, this work attempted to enlighten the relationship between purity and impurity in two *media*: a book and a film. It is a particularly interesting mechanism to work on two different *media* because they have distinct goals. As Laurent Mellet points out, 'the cinematographic adaptation could not substitute the original work: the deeply different natures of the film and of the written work signify that the works will be complementary or contradictory, sometimes close to one another, but never identical'.<sup>162</sup>

This research was conducted in the hope of exploring the notions of purity and impurity as deeply as possible but, unfortunately, due to the expanse of their meanings, this paper cannot be considered as an exhaustive work. Nevertheless, it paved the way for future works on McCourt's corpus composed of *Angela's Ashes* and its sequel entitled *'Tis*.<sup>163</sup> Considering the fascinating topics of purity and impurity they could be further analysed in such works. Furthermore, McCourt's third and last book about his life as an English teacher in America called *Teacher Man*<sup>164</sup> could also be integrated to that corpus by taking a closer look at the narrative. A detailed analysis of the contemporary character that is embodied by Frank, his evolution in these three works and the new perspectives that would emerge regarding the

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<sup>162</sup> L, Mellet, S, Wells-Lassagne. *op. cit.* Translated by the author: « L'adaptation cinématographique ne saurait remplacer l'œuvre-source : les natures profondément différentes du film et de l'écrit signifient que les œuvres seront complémentaires ou contradictoires, parfois proches l'une de l'autre, mais jamais identiques », p. 9.

<sup>163</sup> McCourt, Frank. *'Tis*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999.

<sup>164</sup> McCourt, Frank. *Teacher Man: a Memoir*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006.



autobiographical genre, as well as the notions of purity and impurity would be of particular interest.

These notions could also be studied in a more literary perspective and by saying so I am thinking of the more or less pure aspect of writing. McCourt's sincere storytelling made me think of Ernest Hemingway's authentic style of writing in his book *The Old Man and the Sea*. This feeling might have been caused by the notion of solitude also shared by Frank McCourt and the shortness of the majority of some sentences. Indeed, McCourt's book ends on a single word 'Tis' (Mccourt 235) and Hemingway makes his 'old man' use very few and short words all along his book such as 'Plenty'<sup>165</sup> in the penultimate page. Both books use short sentences, which adds to the authentic truthfulness of the style, hence the link with what could be called a 'pure narration'. The qualities of tenacity and positive outlook through the hardships they went through make them pure characters. It is thanks to their permanent quest for a better life, implying a certain form of plenitude, that purity reveals itself.

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<sup>165</sup> Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. London: Arrow Books, 2004. p. 98.

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