

Frank mccourt: teacher man

[Profession](#), [Teacher](#)



Frank McCourt: Teacher Man Book Review Prestipino April 30, 2012 Outline

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Review We all know the rules in classrooms. " Children are to keep the
voices down. They are not to roam room or hallways. There can be no
learning in a noisy atmosphere. The classroom is not a playground. There
should be no throwing of things. If students want to ask a question or answer
a question they are to raise their hands. They must not be allowed to call
out. Calling out could lead to pandemonium and that would make a bad
impression on Board of Education officials from Brooklyn or educators
visiting from foreign parts. "(p. 148) Take these rules and make the opposite
the classroom's reality. In Mr. McCourt's classroom, the reader witnesses a
chaotic school life, far from discipline and order. The author does not even
wait until page 3, until he reveals how his students throw around sandwiches
and fight with each other. Not only this scene demonstrates why principles
and officials see frequently the necessity to fire this untypical Irish teacher. "
Good teachers run a tight ship. "(p. 149) So, does that mean that our teacher
here, is a bad teacher? In the following analysis, I want to argue for the
opposite, namely, showing how this teacher can be defined as a good
teacher, as an outstanding one, even. Particularly three personality features
will be focused, along with two important messages, the book sends out.
Finally we want to see how this book is not only a lesson for the reader but
also amusement. In his thirty-years teaching career, Mr. McCourt learned one

thing: "Honesty is the best policy." In many instances, the teacher just reveals his honest feelings in front of the whole class and does not fear any controversial reactions. Whenever he is asked for something he is unsure about or does simply not know the correct answer, he would just admit that he does not know and that he would look it up later. He feels that there is no use in not being honest. He even confesses that at times, he is struggling with negative feelings: "I told my class I was so uncertain about teaching." (p. 58) The reason why he sticks to his morals and principles of honesty is simple: "Even if they [the students] lie to themselves and the world they look for honesty in the teacher." (p. 203) A teacher should always uphold this principle. He learned this lesson particularly at one school: McKee vocational school, where "you have to make your own way in the classroom. You have to find yourself. You have to develop your own style, your own techniques. You have to tell the truth or you'll be found out." (p. 113) At this school, the reader perceives his belief in honesty also at one passage where he is showing, and indirectly criticizing, the corrupt procedures of grading executed by his fellow teachers there. Those just assign their grades according to their likes and dislikes, distorting and manipulating the evaluative factors (see p. 108). His good morals are also visible when a mother offers him to spend an adventurous weekend on whatever resort he chooses just to let her daughter into his class. He takes it for granted to turn down this offer, as it is corrupt. His colleagues, however, do not hold the same position and make fun of him: "What's the matter with you?" (p. 201) Nevertheless there is more that makes him a great teacher. Not only his honesty but also his loyalty towards students is outstanding. We always think

of the teacher-student relationship as being an antagonistically one, sometimes even aversive. Not for Frank McCourt. The reader sees that when he had to attend the first Open School day. As opposed to all expectations he never says anything negative about his students. Whenever parents ask how their children are doing, he responds that they are doing great and that there is no need to worry. He comments the following: " I was learning that teachers and kids have to stick together in the face of parents, supervisors and the world in general. " (p. 71) Also, there is this thrilling moment in the book where a father simply walks in his class and starts beating his son. He sees that as a scandal and interferes, protecting his student and stop this brutal savageness. (see pp. 91, 92) He usually emphasizes and feels with his students taking them under his protective shield, contrasting once more his colleagues' opinions who claim: " We have huge classes, not time, and we're not psychologists. " (p. 100) Instead, he listens to every individual and shares some interesting and touching stories of his students, as for example Sal Battaglia's and Louises love story that ended in a disaster as Sal, being Italian, got beaten down by Louises folks, Irish people. (See p. 93-95) Being on the kids' side gives him a lot of advantages. The most positive result, of course, is that he is liked by the students, who think, " he was a vital, engaging, teacher. " (p. 183) He often also hears compliments: " Mr. McCourt, you really nice. The class nodded yeah yeah and the Puerto Rican boys smiled in the back of the room. " (p. 146) He is very considerate and reflects about students' problems, even though he sometimes is embarrassed: " I wish I could take him aside for a talk, but I know I'm no good at that. It's easier to talk to the whole class than to one boy. It isn't so

intimate. " (p. 96) Outstanding is also his performance when he takes his class to the movies and travels through the city of New York. All his students are completely overwhelmed by the city and run around excitedly. Passer-by's though commented deceptively " they don't know how to behave like human beings" (p. 138). Having heard this, the offended teacher defends his students and takes their position. In the end, Frank knows that he can proudly say: " Ten years of teaching and he can say: ' You're doing your dogged best,'" whereas all those other teachers don't give a " fiddler's fart" about their students. In his coming of age biography, the character grows a lot and develops his own teaching method; his secret of being a good teacher. " I was finding my voice and my own style of teaching. I was learning to be comfortable in the classroom. " (p. 204) The reader can totally witness this successful growth, starting with the scene of rowdy behavior and fights in the middle of his classrooms and his innocence. He is often being extremely criticized for only telling stories, rather than teaching " solid stuff". He is called " the teacher who cannot say ' no'. " (p. 95) He is often mocked for his Irish accent and has to face harsh critique by parents whenever Open Class days are held: " Stick to the spelling and the words, Mr. McCurd, and the parents of this school will thank you forever. Forget the storytelling. " (p. 75) During the years he often has moments in which he thinks that he should change his teaching style and start being " tough, organized, disciplined and focused. " (p. 147) However, this teacher figures out a unique and incredibly effective way of teaching that brings me to the point of labeling him a very good teacher. As already stated, he is honest to the students, to himself and particularly loyal. He recognizes every single individual; " I don't see a class

as one unit sitting and listening to me. There are faces showing degrees of interest or indifference. It's the indifference that challenges me. " (p. 148) and he develops his own style to teach AND entertain the youth. Frank McCourt lays out a plan for self-improvement to make him a better teacher that is disciplined, traditional, scholarly, resourceful and always ready with answers. His basic plan consisted of the following: " I still told stories, but I was learning how to connect them with the likes of the Wife of Bath, Tom Sawyer, Holden Caulfield, Romeo and his reincarnation in West Side Story. English teacher are always being told, you gotta make it relevant. " (p. 204) He finds his secret recipe through a lot of reflection and self-critique, often connected with depressive moods. The reader witnesses how hard he is trying to always self-improve and how much he is aware of his responsibility of a teacher and master in the students' educational progress. At one point, when he tries to teach new vocabulary through reading cookbooks and singing recipes, he starts worrying. " How can all this be justified to the authorities who keep an eye on the curriculum? " (p. 209) He believes through his creative and innovative style of approaching students he rather " turned the classroom into a playground, and turned his classroom into a playground, a rap session and a group-therapy forum. " (p. 211) At the peak of his coming-of-age he writes an imaginary letter of critique to himself, but he concludes that there is no use in fearing authorities' punishment if he is being his own enemy: " Why fear the criticism of others when you, yourself, are first out of the critical gate? If self- denigration is the race I am the winner, even before the starting gun. Collect the bets. " (p. 211) Yes, sometimes not only the students and not only the reader of his biography,

but even Frank McCourt wonders what his teaching strategy is. What is the way of success? In Chapter 17 he finally reveals it: “ Find what you love and do it. That’s what it boils down to. I admit I didn’t always love teaching. I was out of my depth. You’re on your own in the classroom, one man or woman facing five classes every day, five classes of teenagers. One unit of energy against one hundred and seventy-five units of energy, one hundred and seventy-five ticking bombs, and you have to find ways of saving your own life. They may like you, they may even love you, but they are young and it is the business of the young to push the old off the planet. [...] After a few years you develop antennae. You can tell when you’ve reaches them or alienated them. It’s chemistry. It’s psychology. It’s animal instinct. You are with the kids and as long as you want to be a teacher, there’s no escape. Don’t expect help from people who’ve escaped the classroom, the higher-ups. They’re busy going to lunch and thinking higher thoughts. It’s you and the kids. So, there’s the bell. See you later. Find what you love and do it.” (p. 255) Turns out that even the superintendent applauds and tells him that his teaching is creative and innovative and that there needed to be more teachers like him. So, in his biography, the reader not only gets the chance to analyze his outstanding features of honesty, loyalty and self-improvement through reflection but one can also detect two important messages which Frank McCourt wants the reader to see. First of all, he depicts the miserable situation that teachers have to live in. He often has to change his position; he taught in four different high schools (McKee, Fashion Industries, Seward Park, Stuyvesant) and at a college in Brooklyn, where parents and school administrations always criticize him. Many times, he also thought that

students only used teachers: " They just use you. They find out where you're vulnerable. " (p. 78) Therefore he often asked himself: " What was the use? Teacher, my arse. " (p. 55) He found himself as being a slave to the rules set by the Board of Education that required a strict lesson plan, stating your aim and your motivational means, a summary and a homework for every single class. He found himself imprisoned, with little opportunity to escape the system and practice his own teaching method. He often feels he is refused in the new American society. Being a teacher, " I was disheartened. There is no room for me in the great American Dream. " (p. 56) He then decided to go back to Dublin seeking a PhD. After a while though, he had to be honest to himself and declare: " There was no door for me in Dublin and I had to admit, finally, what ailed me: I missed New York. "(p. 177) Back to New York, he finally thinks he should simply continue his own teaching style. Not only does he tell stories from his youth and adulthood but he also sings recipes, assigns exciting creative writing tasks, like excuse letters to God from Eve and plans fieldtrips to the movies or to parks. He likes to bring the classroom alive and motivate the students. Nevertheless all his effort, however, the book shows how little respect he gets. Especially when he changes to the most prestigious High School in New York, namely Stuyvesant High School, he tells how the parents are merely interested in the success of their children. " The moms and dads have high expectations and nothing less than success will satisfy them. [...] No wonder Stanley is screwed up. The mother keeps the classic six-room apartment on the Upper West Side while Dad is in some hovel in the arse end of the Bronx. " (p. 233) At that school he encountered a lot of stress, being obliged to teach five classes and keep up a

high level. The reader witnesses how he starts procrastinating and postponing his duties, often indulging into alcohol as the only means to escape the bitter reality: " When you teach five high school classes a day, five days a week, you're not inclined to go home to clear your head and fashion deathless prose," he writes. "You get no time for reading Graham Greene or Dashiell Hammett, F. Scott Fitzgerald or good old P. G. Wodehouse, or your main man, Mr. Jonathan Swift. You'll go blind reading Joey and Sandra, Tony and Michelle." Unfortunately, no one ever realizes his great efforts and it turns out to be the reality for many, many teachers in this world. " Oh you are a teacher? Nice. You get a lot of holidays and work only from 8am to 1pm", is what even I have to hear almost every time I answer what my profession was. As we see in this reviewed book, the life of a teacher is more than just a few hours of entertaining a bundle of youths. The second problem shown and analyzed in the book " Teacher man" is the one of a clash of several cultures in one classroom. As the story is told during the American immigration period, most classes of McCourt are full of multiculturalism and multiethnicism. It is the teachers' task to unify all those different individuals and create a unity out of this heterogeneous group. His first encounter with a diverse classroom landscape happened at the New York community college in Brooklyn. First, he had a hard time adjusting to the different level in a college. " I hardly knew what to do when those first classes filed in, sat and waited for my lecture. No one asked for the lavatory pass. No one raised a hand to accuse anyone of stealing a sandwich or a book or a seat. " (p. 114) Then, however he describes how diverse his students are and the problems that arise out of this situation. The

latter are lacking motivation and belief in self-efficacy as depicted in a case of a Cuban student. She even states: " I am nobody. " (p. 118) Having to struggle in a new environment means working hard, being underpaid and always fearing to lose self-subsistence. As a result, almost everyone in his class at this college plagiarizes in the final paper. This event makes the teacher immediately change school. He simply does not want to continue working with students that perceive themselves as self-inefficient and unmotivated due to their problems at home. At his next school, though he has to continue his struggle with multicultural students. As he accidentally even gets into a fight with a Cuban student, called Hector, he is fired, being accused of racism and ethnic discrimination (see p. 122). Seward Park high school then was not any different. En contraire, he found himself being employed in a " melting-pot" hotspot. " This was a melting-pot school: Jewish, Chinese, Puerto Rican, Greek, Dominican, Russian, Italian and I had no preparation or training for teaching English as a Second Language. " (p. 129) Also here, the fact that the students are desperate in their poor circumstances affects the classroom climate negatively. The teacher is being ignored by them, disrespected and not valued at all. " I faced the hardest challenge of my whole teaching career. " It was a " gender clash; generation clash; culture clash; racial clash. " (p. 136) Nevertheless, he tries to approach the students with his compassion and with fun activities. In an attempt to show them that reality does not always mean rough days, he takes the students out to the movies and to see Hamlet in a theater. He is finally able to acquire some respect: " They were looking at me, talking to me, recognizing my existence, including me in their world. " (p. 137) In 1971

he changes to his last high school: Stuyvesant High School. He is relieved and very glad having this new opportunity as he states: " In my first year of teaching this was the first time I felt free in the classroom. I could teach whatever I liked. " (p. 186) Even at this prestigious school though, the contemporary immigration problems are a current theme. Ben Chan, a Chinese student of him, approaches McCourt in an attempt to seek for his sympathy. " He was twelve when he came to this country four years ago. He knew no English but he studied hard and learned enough English and mathematics to pass the Stuyvesant High School entrance exam. He was happy to be here and his whole family was so proud of him. People back in China were proud of him. He competed against fourteen thousand kids to get into this school. His father worked six days a week, twelve hours a day, in a restaurant in Chinatown. His mother worked in a downtown sweatshop. Every night she cooked dinner for the whole family, five children, her husband, herself. " (p. 193) Finally, Frank McCourt does not only show how hard it was to teach in those classrooms, but also includes the positive side of multiculturalism. The students brought their special food from their respective countries, told their origins and even went for a nice picnic to the park. Making the lessons more pluricultural and interactive brings the students together and teach them a multicultural education where there is no room for discrimination and racism. Concluding this book review that centered around his qualifying features of being an excellent teacher and the two main themes(teachers and immigration), I want to point out why this book is also extremely entertaining. Although the teacher depicts serious problems, he always does it in a funny way. Sarcasm, irony and humor are

ones of his most prominent rhetoric devices used to make his language unique and particular. Many passages are full of laughs, as for example the sandwich fight in the very first scene of the book, where he simply collects a sandwich from the floor and eats it in front of his students, funnily asking what the special Italian recipe was, that made it that delicious. Whenever he depicts the hard circumstances of a teacher job he is not depressively complaining. No, he rather tells it with a humorous, surely sarcastic undertone that obviously points out what he really wants to state. Let's consider one of my favorite instances as a concluding point to show how entertaining this lecture was: " You know. After school, teacher goes directly home. Carries a bag filled with papers to be read and marked. Might have a cup of tea with spouse. Oh, no. Teacher would never have a glass of wine. That's not how teachers live. They don't go out. Maybe a movie on the weekend. They have dinner. They put their kids to bed. They watch the news before they settle in for the night to read hose papers. At eleven it's time for another cup of tea or glass of warm milk to help them sleep. Then they put on pajamas, kiss the spouse and drift off. Teachers' pajamas are always cotton. What would a teacher be doing in silk pajamas? And, no, they never sleep naked. Man, can you imagine some teacher in this school naked? Teachers are good, proper, professional, conscientious, and they'd never throw a leg over the other one in the bed. Below the belly button the teacher is dead. " (p. 190) Frank McCourt's " Teacher Man" is an extraordinary book, recommendable for almost every reader, teachers, students and even just normal bookworms.