

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

There are three kinds of genre in literature; prose, poetry, and drama (Wellek & Warren, 1956, p.9). I prefer to discuss prose I can directly take the lesson from the characters or the conflicts between characters. In addition, prose is able to reflect the condition of an individual. Unlike dramas or poems, a prose tells the readers more details about the characters' way of thinking in the story, how they behave and what they react and represent the society's condition. For example, by reading Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, I can see how a child must undergo the poor condition of his childhood. Not only that, the novel makes my sympathy to the poor people grow deeper.

Frank McCourt was born in Brooklyn, New York, to Irish immigrant parents. Unable to find work in the depths of the Depression, the McCourt's family returned to Ireland, where they sunk deeper into the poverty (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/mcc1bio-1>).

McCourt's father, an alcoholic, was often without work, drank up what little money he earned and eventually abandoned the family altogether. Three of the seven children died of diseases aggravated by malnutrition and the squalor of their surroundings. Frank McCourt himself nearly died of typhoid fever when he was ten (<http://www.reel.com/books/reviews.asp/MID=128100>).

After quitting school at 13, Frank McCourt alternated between odd jobs and petty crime in an effort to feed himself, his mother, and four surviving brothers and sisters. At 19, he returned to the United States and worked at odd jobs until he was drafted into the United States Army at the onset of the Korean War. McCourt spent the war stationed in Germany and on his return to civilian life was able to pursue a college education on the G.I. Bill. Although he had never attended high school, he was able to persuade the admissions office of New York University to accept him as a student.

Although his childhood interest in language and storytelling were fed by creative writing classes and his own constant reading, he did not feel ready to

pursue as career as a professional writer. On graduation, he went to work for the New York City Public School system, where he taught for the next 27 years.

Although McCourt spent his summers working on a novel drawing on his youth in Ireland, he was unable to find his own voice until he retired from teaching. After years of teaching creative writing to young people, McCourt determined to write his own life story (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/mcc1bio-1>).

I am amazed by Frank McCourt because of his tremendous effort in surviving the ordeal of his childhood and the way he shares his bitter experience. McCourt's ordeal of his childhood is his inability to have good childhood because he is born into such a poor family and live in a poor society. This poor conditions makes McCourt have to experience a lot of bitter experiences such as starvation and death in the family. The people of Limerick are so poor that starvation has somehow become a way of life. Diseases such as consumption, pneumonia, and typhoid are very common in this city. The condition of the boys are also poor, they go to school barefoot or in pieces of flopping rubber, also for them stealing is a necessity since their parents are poor. Above all, there is "the drink"--the endemic disease of Irish fathers who spend their weeks' wages in the pub on Friday night. Frank leaves school to earn money for the family (his father had joined the war-time wave of work in England, but continued to drink his earnings away), and to save for a return to America. These are the double duties that Frank had to face, going to school to study and at the same time earning money to survive.

Secondly, my amazement toward Frank McCourt is because I never find any other writer who exposes his childhood in the same way as McCourt did. Although Frank is physically weak and prone to infection, he has emotional strength and a survivor mentality. He is also highly intelligent, works hard at school, and is a good writer. His competence in writing can be seen since his childhood in the novel when he is asked to write a composition. Frank, then, writes a composition by the title "Jesus and the Weather". Indeed, all the class get surprised by his composition (Mccourt, 1991, p. 205-206). In Frank's own word, he is interested in writing since he is still a lecturer:

Instead of teaching writing I 'conducted' writing classes. I tried to show my students the significance of their own lives which they sometimes thought insignificant. I hoped they'd realize the value of their own lives, that they were good enough to write about. So they took the plunge and they wrote and some were willing to read to the class and I think they were glad they did. Then they'd say to me, 'Why don't you write something and read it to the class?' And I did -- more and more

(<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/mcc1bio-1>).

McCourt's memoir describes an entire block of houses sharing a single outhouse, ground floor dwellings flooded by constant rain, a home infested with rats and vermin. Despite the horrors of McCourt's childhood, he tells his story with humor, brilliant description, and deep compassion for his family, even for the shiftless father who instilled in him a love of language and storytelling

(<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9708/reviews/shannon.html>). Although Frank finally manages to survive the ordeal of his childhood, his childhood experience makes Frank become a strong individual. As McCourt stated:
As McCourt himself stated:

I've been writing in notebooks for forty years or so. But then when I started writing it, notebooks would jog my memory somewhat, but the writing itself took its own shape. I would just circle around certain incidents, like a vulture with carrion until it yielded up some incident in my childhood, especially the religious stuff: the sacraments, the First Communion, and Confession, and Confirmation, and all of those turning points in the life of a little Irish Catholic boy. And the stuff about my father going to England. That was easy to evoke because it was so traumatic

(<http://www.read-on.org/~int/mccourt.html>).

Angela's Ashes nowadays has sold over 4 million copies, has been published in 27 countries and has been translated into 17 languages. It won McCourt the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Award, the ABBY

Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Biography

(<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/mcc1bio-1>).

Besides *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt also wrote another book, entitled *'Tis*. His second book *'Tis* picks up the story of his life where *Angela's Ashes* left off, with his arrival in America at age 19. McCourt's second novel quickly becomes the best-seller book as soon as it was published.

Among McCourt's works, I choose *Angela's Ashes* to be analyzed in my thesis because this book is the stepping stone for McCourt's later works. In this book, we can see how a child must face the fact that his childhood is not as pleasant as other children. This work performs Irish life especially Catholic Irish life which influences much to the main character, Frank McCourt himself. *Angela's Ashes* describes the main character's life that lives in poverty stricken household during the depression. Critics say that this novel as a "scathing indictment of the culture of poverty"

(<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9708/reviews/shannon.html>).

I choose this book as the subject of my thesis because I am interested in the way the main character survive the ordeal of his childhood, which he did it in a unique way. What I mean by unique way is that despite the unpleasant condition of his childhood experienced by Frank McCourt, he narrate his story with a good sense of humor. The novel describes the narrative progresses of the main character clearly. According to Campbell (2001) it would be a misleading to give the impression that *Angela's Ashes* is a depressing reading. Instead, Campbell added that the novel show wit and humor with which the main character describes his poor life

(<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/anthony.campbell1/bookreviews/mccourt-1.html>).

I completely agree with Campbell (2001) since I also do not feel depressed when I read this novel. Instead, I feel amazed with the way the main character see his poor condition with humor. Meanwhile, according to Shannon (1997), the main character in the novel never really shows a psychological development. The main character discovers Swift and Shakespeare, but never reading plays in the story. He discovers sex, but sexual awakenings appears simply as an awakening to sex, not to some salvific knowledge

(<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9708/reviews/shannon.html>). Shannon's opinion shows that what the main character actually does is to only protect himself from the poor environment.

People sometimes neglect the importance of a childhood of an individual (Miller, 1990, p.ii). The childhood phase is sometimes considered as a minor factor which does not contribute much on the development of an individual.

Picasso, for example, this famous painter actually suffers a traumatic childhood, but he is able to survive from it (Miller, 1990, p.2). Not only survive, he also expresses his childhood trauma in his paintings. From his paintings, we can see that Picasso often drew human's body in a very odd manner. According to Miller (1990, p.17), through the paintings of odd human body Picasso is actually trying to communicate his inner thought and his memory about his traumatic childhood. When Picasso was still three years old, he and his family had to survive the terrible damage from the earthquake. Yet, how Picasso was able to survive from his traumatic childhood is because of his defense mechanism, which enables him to protect him and guard him along his childhood. Unconsciously, Picasso develops a mechanism which enables him to defend himself from unpleasant surroundings. In relation with the novel and this thesis, Picasso's experience shows how a child manages to overcome the unpleasant experience in his childhood and how this trauma affects his/her later life.

According to Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, a talented man like the main character in the novel or Picasso is actually:

a man who turns from reality because he cannot come to terms with the demand for the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction as it is first made, and who then in phantasy-life allows full play to his erotic ambition and wishes (Wellek & Warren, 1956, p.82).

Throughout this novel, the main character displays a wry sense of humor. At first, I am very surprised to see how a child faces the ordeal of his childhood by developing a sense of humor. I consider this as a unique way for surviving the ordeal of his childhood. It is proven later on when the main character is finally able to survive from the ordeal of his childhood and to step to a better life. Usually, poor condition like we see in the novel will make a person become a

depressed person and do negative things in his/her life. By definition, defense mechanisms are the behavioral strategies or responses made to alleviate or reduce anxiety (Weber, 1991, p.195).

For those reasons, the topic that I have decided to analyze is the main character's defense mechanism as a way to survive the ordeal of his childhood. I choose this topic because the novel attracts me much since the novel gives me good insights about life.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The story *Angela's Ashes* show how Frank McCourt survive the ordeal of his childhood by developing defense mechanism. I want to know how the three defense mechanisms, i.e. repression, displacement, and intellectualization are carried out by Frank McCourt in order to make himself survive from the ordeal of his childhood.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to show the ways the three kinds of defense mechanism are carried out by the main character in order to survive the ordeal of his childhood.

1.4 Importance of the Study

Through this study, I expect that the readers will know more how a child survives the ordeal of his/her life. The reader will also be able to understand that struggle of life in childhood and teenage life in McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. Moreover, readers who have similar issues in their lives may find the enlightenment that guides them out of their doubts and pessimistic way of thinking. In addition, I hope that the readers will put high appreciation on Frank McCourt's works, especially his book *Angela's Ashes* and get the benefit through reading the book. I also expect that this thesis will make my fellow students of the faculty of letters to be more aware about the importance of understanding the importance of childhood phase in human life.

1.5 Scope and Limitations.

In this thesis, the scope of the analysis is the main character's ways in surviving the ordeal of his childhood. I limit my analysis on the main character, who narrates the whole story and his struggle in his poor environment for a better life.

1.6 Methodology

Bearing in mind that this thesis' aim is to show how the main character in Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* develops his defense mechanism in order to survive the ordeal of his childhood, I use the library research by searching as many as possible any books, articles, essays, or any other kinds of sources that are related to my topic. However, I will only cite some theories that relate with my topic that I want to develop from those sources. In doing the analysis with regard to the purpose of the study, I will apply psychological approach namely defense mechanism of the ego from Sigmund Freud. This theory originated from the discipline of psychoanalysis. That is why I will explain briefly first about psychoanalysis in the second chapter of my thesis before I can explain about defense mechanism.

1.7 Organization of the Study

The thesis will be discussed in four chapters. The first chapter comprises of the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the importance of the study, the scope and limitations, the methodology and the organization of the study. The second chapter contains the theory I used in analyzing the novel, which is the theory of defense mechanism of the ego from Sigmund Freud. The third chapter will consist of the thesis writer's analysis on the main character's defense mechanism in dealing with the ordeal of his childhood. Finally, the last chapter is the conclusion in which contains the results and the findings that I have from my thesis.