McCourt's Angela's Ashes and the Portrait of the Other


Abstract

McCourt's book, Angela's Ashes: a Memoir of a Childhood, Flamingo, 1997. Extrapolating from this book, it is clear that McCourt constructs a wide variety of categories of people—English, Protestants, Jehovah Witnesses, Muslims, Jews, Americans, Africans, Indians, the Irish upper classes—as Other. However, my interest of this article is rather more limited. It is restricted to those who would, broadly, be termed "non-Europeans and/or of non-European origin" in McCourt's novelised memoir of his childhood to young adulthood. A rigorous critique of a book like McCourt's is necessitated by its power within modern literary discourse. The book was—and has remained—among the top best sellers, at least in the English speaking world. It has been given almost mythical importance by equating the author with Charles Dickens. The book, however, is steeped in racist discourse that has so far gone uncontested. As an autobiography, the author has been afforded a ready camouflage that disguises the work as a harmless narrative of an oppressed child. Nothing is further from the "truth" when it comes to the oppression of the Other in the very same work. This article rejects the assumption that McCourt was simply and innocently retrieving experience that was trapped within what Foucault called the "discursive formation" of the time. Instead, one should view McCourt's work as a contemporary one and an important element in our day-to-day Eurocentric discourse about the Other. While much of McCourt's Limerick is no more, the portrait of the Other that he details can still be detected today in the Irish media, and, indeed, in that of most other European countries. Others are depicted as dependent, dirty, hungry, sickly and untrustworthy. It is precisely these images that are contested in this article.

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In interview, McCourt has stated that James Joyce’s 1916 novel A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man was an important influence on Angela’s Ashes. Like McCourt’s memoir, Joyce’s novel details the coming-of-age of a young, poor Irish boy in semi-autobiographical detail. (McCourt’s decision to print the dialogue in his novel without quotation marks is an explicit homage to Portrait.) Another important work of literature in Angela’s Ashes, mentioned explicitly at several points, is the “Saga of Cuchulain.” Cuchulain is a legendary Irish hero, renowned for