CHAPTER IV

FROM “LOW ROAD” TO “HIGH ROAD”: TEACHER MAN

*Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt is a stunning depiction of the experiences of a sensitive human being and a teacher who really wanted to make a difference to the young students who studied under him. There are not many memoirs written by school teachers. What the teacher feels today has not been so poignantly captured as McCourt has done in his book. Completely free from any academic, intellectual pretensions the memoir is an honest, forthright account written in a style dominated by self deprecation. There have been complaints that he has exaggerated his childhood poverty but that does not deter us from appreciating the felt experiences narrated in a manner that overwhelms one’s heart and lays bare what the teacher has come to suffer in today’s world. The memoir also gives an idea regarding where education stands in the present context and what status the teacher enjoys in the society, a condition best expressed by the author in the Prologue to *Teacher Man*.

When I taught in New York City high schools for thirty years no one but my students paid me a scrap of attention. In the world outside the school I was invisible. Then I wrote a book about my childhood and became the mick of the moment. I hope the book would explain family history to McCourt children and grandchildren. I hoped it might sell a few hundred copies and I might be invited to have discussions with book clubs. Instead it jumped onto best-seller list and was translated into thirty languages and I was dazzled. The book was my second act (2-3).
McCourt here is referring to his first book *Angela’s Ashes*. It is obvious from the passage that more than celebrating his success he responds with a detached wryness. It is the irony of his success that dominates. While use of technology in education has its advantages, the side effect is that it impersonalizes the teacher. The human presence of the teacher is lost and the students have no living, inspiring mental models to mimic and adopt. But in *Teacher Man* the non human presence is captured in the method-driven, within-the-box teaching done by most. Teachers caught in that mode do not consider students as individuals to be grown but miscreants to be mistrusted and controlled. The memoir by McCourt graphically presents this situation prevailing in the educational system not only in the US but elsewhere as well.

The neglect suffered by teachers is real. The respect a teacher earned in bygone times is near impossible in the current scenario. McCourt’s observation concerning it in the same prologue is telling.

In America, doctors, lawyers, generals, actors, television people and politicians are admired and rewarded. Not teachers. Teaching is the downstairs maid of professions. Teachers are told to use the service door and go around the back. They are congratulated on having ATTO (All That Time Off). They are spoken of patronizingly and patted, retroactively, on their silver locks. Oh, yes, I had an English teacher, Miss Smith, who really inspired me. I’ll never forget dear old Miss Smith. She used to say that if she reached one child in her forty years of teaching it would make it all worthwhile. She’d die happy. The inspiring English teacher then fades into gray shadows to eke out her days on a penny-pinching pension, dreaming of the
one child she might have reached. Dream on, teacher. You will not be celebrated (4-5).

Despite the apparent humour it is difficult to miss the underlying strain of bitterness. The passage is also an authentic diagnosis of what ails the teaching profession in the current context. The recent pedagogical slogan “The teacher is no more a sage on the stage but a guide on the side” in spite of its democratic intent is definitely belittling and McCourt here gives us a picture that is accurate and moving. The teacher seems to spend all his/her time in life in the sidelines. Reward and recognition are not tangible as is the teachers’ output and productivity. In such a profession, a high self esteem is what can make it meaningful and productive and carry a teacher through his/her career. The quantifying madness that is the hallmark of consumerist societies tends to force teachers to become soulless. Conscientiousness is the casualty eventually, a fact repeatedly captured in the life narrative of McCourt. Such teachers brought down by the forces operating in society are not dismissed by the author but viewed with sympathy as victims of a system that has lost its sense of purpose and direction.

McCourt’s one enduring quality that runs through the entire narrative is the unabashed honesty in his portrayals of adventures and misadventures. He enters the teaching profession not with any delusions of it being a noble profession and so on. He says in retrospect in the Prologue:

Now I think it time to give myself credit at least for one virtue: doggedness. Not as glamorous as ambition or talent or intellect or charm, but still the one thing that got me through the days and nights (2).
Though he uses the word “doggedness” in keeping with the tone of the book, in actuality the experiences he shares with us consistently demonstrate the trait of perseverance. His superiors tell him otherwise, the students resist and the seemingly commonsensical perceptions that govern the profession challenge his attempts but he refuses to give in. The memoir is also an effective presentation of the behaviour and mind of the American adolescents and has important implications for psychology of adolescence, especially late adolescence.

McCourt finds himself an outsider in Ireland as well as in the US. He goes back to Ireland where he is mocked at by other boys for his American accent and back at the US he has to face the prevailing prejudices against the Irish and the digs at his Irish ways of speaking and manners. Though born in the US McCourt grows up in Ireland. Back in the US he gets himself educated with a degree from New York University. But he has no idea of what it is to grow up and live as an adolescent in the US.

Teenagers? In Ireland we saw them in American movies, moody, surly, driving around in cars, and we wondered why they were moody and surly. They had food and clothes and money and still they were mean to their parents. There were no teenagers in Ireland, not in my world. You were a child. You went to school till you were fourteen. If you were mean to your parents they’d give you a good belt in the gob and send you flying across the room. You grew up, got a boring job, got married, drank your pint on a Friday night, jumped on the wife that same night and kept her pregnant forever. In a few years you migrated to England to work on the building sites or to enlist in His Majesty’s forces and fight for the Empire (14-15).
The contrast the writer gives us here informs us of and explains the difficulties he faces and which are selected for inclusion in the memoir. Having grown up in a different social milieu and culture he finds situations doubly challenging.

He suffers what can be called social exclusion in Ireland as well as in America. Surmounting these is no easy task and the fact that he has nevertheless done it speaks for the tenacity of his spirit. We cannot but agree with him that it is his virtue of “doggedness” which has seen him through.

Another trait we often see in him and his actions is a down to earth sense of pragmatism. Normally, people who find themselves in situations like the ones McCourt is thrown into resort to defensiveness making excuses for their shortcomings and failures. But McCourt is unmercifully honest with himself. This trait of self scrutiny is also consistently seen in him. In fact, this personality trait is linked to his sense of pragmatism. Even after having completed his career his stance is no different.

On the first day of my teaching career, I was almost fired for eating the sandwich of a school boy. On the second day I was almost fired for mentioning the possibility of friendship with a sheep. Otherwise, there was nothing remarkable about my thirty years in the high school classrooms of New York City. I often doubted if I should be there at all. At the end I wondered how I lasted that long (11).

The first incident involves a potential fight between Petey and Andy because of the former’s offer of his sandwich and the latter’s remark. As a teacher McCourt should stop the fight to prove his class management abilities. To be challenged thus on the very first day of the profession is indeed a difficult proposition and McCourt does have a real problem on his hands. In other professions if you fail
you do so in comparative obscurity but in the teaching profession it happens in the front of an audience catapulting the embarrassment ratio to heights not scalable by any ordinary effort. This explains why such a fall is extremely painful and humilitating.

While the class eagerly awaits a fight, McCourt moves toward Petey and makes his first “teacher statement.” “Stop throwing sandwiches” (15). Benny, another student, taunts him by pointing out the irrelevance of his statement as the act has already been done. He cannot work out a fitting response to the situation.

Professors of Education at New York University never lectured on how to handle flying—sandwich situations. They talked about theories and philosophies of Education, about moral and ethical imperatives, about the necessity of dealing with the whole child, the gestalt, if you don’t mind, the child’s felt needs, but never about critical moments in the classrooms (16).

Resolved not to act in accordance with the student expectations of what a teacher would do under such situations, he observes the sandwich taking in all the visual details of the dish. Then he does something nobody would guess. He tells us, “I ate the sandwich.” McCourt here evinces an empathic trait that encompasses both the cognitive and the affective. He is aware of his as well as the students’ emotional states. He is in a way cornered, for, the students are prepared to receive the typical first-day-at-class reaction from a teacher. But they are least prepared to witness a response that is person-centred rather than teacher-centred.

An outburst and threat would have been in tune with student expectations because they do understand them as weakness and discomfiture, a comic spectacle to be enjoyed. The act of eating the sandwich, while it seems a thoughtless and
comical response to the situation, can be termed an instance of “emotional stability,” one of the sixteen primary factors listed by Cattell. Though tensed up, absolutely normal for a first day experience, he defuses the situation by his act. While it cannot be said that there is any premeditation prior to his act, he maintains his cool and fits Cattell’s high range descriptors of emotionally stable, adaptive, mature and faces reality calmly. There is no apparent indication of any reasoning or calculated thinking involved in his decision. He seems to act out of an intuitive grasp of the psychological states the students are in. It would be relevant to remember here that McCourt’s experiences as a growing adolescent and a student might have had a hand in arriving at this intuitive understanding especially if we take into account the effect it has on the students. His primary objective is to create a meaningful at the same time sensitive experiential link with his students. Though he does not state it directly, his practice of telling stories about his days as a child and youth is aimed at this. The sandwich incident does help him endear himself to the students.

In a professional atmosphere where students are considered not as teachers’ natural friends but as diabolical “buggers,” McCourt thinks differently.

In the high school classroom you are a drill sergeant, a rabbi, a shoulder to cry on, a disciplinarian, a singer, a low-level scholar, a clerk, a referee, a clown, a counselor, a dress-code enforcer, a conductor, a tap dancer, a politician, a therapist, a fool, a traffic cop, a priest, a mother-father-brother-sister-uncle-aunt, a bookkeeper, a critic, a psychologist, the last straw (19).

It is obvious that we have in McCourt a person sensitive and open to experiences. He is counselled by his senior colleagues not to involve himself much and keep a
careful distance. Most of them tend to feel that the students are out to get them.

But McCourt would not entertain such feelings. A careful observer of experiences and one that is keenly aware of what happens within himself at the rational and feeling levels, he has listed the multifarious roles a teacher has to perform.

Cattell’s high range descriptors of sensitivity help us understand the person who is giving us his life narrative. He fits the traits of being sensitive, aesthetic, sentimental, tender minded, intuitive and refined. It might all sound romantic but his responses and actions have behind them a discernible practical sense that is not just utilitarian. McCourt has the kind of pragmatism which William James observes with reference to the ideas of Charles Peirce who introduced the term into the field of philosophy.

To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only to consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all (43).

Sentimental, idealistic and adventurous McCourt is in this incidence. But it is not foolhardiness or thoughtless adventurism. His is well prepared and the unexpected reaction comes to have desired effects. The reflective side of the writer, though present, does not readily strike us as the self deprecatory humour distracts us. But a careful reading will make clear the amount of thinking that goes into his decisions and actions. It is possible that he does so in order to avoid his narrative
resembling self congratulatory chest beating and romantic sentimentality.

One cannot miss the narrative being carefully laced with subtle understatements.

The deep concern to be a good man and a teacher never leaves him. That the teacher should be a man first is suggested by the title itself. In spite of the advice by his colleagues to be just a teacher, McCourt has persisted with his intention to be both a teacher and a man—a teacher man.

The advice was wasted. I learned through trial and error and paid a price for it. I had to find my own way of being a man and a teacher and that is what I struggled with for thirty years in and out of the classrooms of New York. My students didn’t know there was a man up there escaping a cocoon of Irish history and Catholicism, leaving bits of that cocoon everywhere (20).

McCourt wants to find out for himself what it is to teach. He is caustic about the methods of teaching taught in teacher training institutions. “There were courses on how to teach by professors who did not know how to teach” (25). Learning is growing in freedom and McCourt seems to subscribe to this philosophy. The human element can never be compromised. The following passage captures effectively the spirit behind all of his thoughts and actions.

It was clear I was not cut out to be a purposeful teacher who brushed aside all questions, complaints, to get on with the well planned lesson. That would have reminded me of that school in Limerick where the lesson was the king and we were nothing. I was already dreaming of a school where teachers were guides and mentors, not taskmasters. I didn’t have any particular philosophy of education except that I was uncomfortable with bureaucrats, the
higher-ups, who had escaped classrooms only to turn and bother the occupants of those classrooms, teachers and students. I never wanted to fill out their forms, follow their guidelines, administer their examinations, tolerate their snooping, adjust myself to their programs and courses of study (24).

The individual should not be kept out of learning. Recent researches in neuroscience have repeatedly emphasized the role of mirror neurons in learning, especially their imitative functions. Empathy based imitation happens best when one has a human model before him. In the absence of the human element teaching-learning is reduced to mere abstract rules and principles that are not located in the experience of the individual. McCourt’s attempts to reach his students as a living human being make much sense in the light of the findings in neuroscience. He does have his doubts about telling stories about himself and his life but this strategy proves to be a very successful one. This is evident from what he has to say about the way he is received by his students and also from the popularity of Teacher Man, a humanistic exercise that fuses wry humour, sentiments and fine feelings. And more, it gives a bird’s eye view of what it is to go to America and make it big. The cultural undercurrents from Eisenhower’s time to the turn of the century are embedded in the narrative.

Another interesting incidence that the writer gives us is his response to the student question, “did you go out with girls in Ireland?” In reply he says, “No, dammit. Sheep. We went out with sheep. What do you think we went out with?” (22). The remark meant to suggest the agricultural background of Irish life in a lighter vein creates a furore with a number of parents demanding his dismissal. We have in this instance McCourt tasting the ire of the American middle class.
His remark is construed as suggesting bestiality and the Principal has to defend McCourt by giving the excuse of his being from Ireland. This is a continuing feature of not only American culture but the whole western culture. The observation of Philip Rieff, a professor of sociology, is relevant here. “Moralizing belongs to the ambitious middle range of the Western social structure, if it may be properly located anywhere at all” (247-48). The Principal tells him that a letter in his file at this time will ruin the upward mobility of his career. But McCourt is not interested in such vertical mobility. “I don’t want to be principal. I just want to teach” (24).

In this instance we see him to be a socially bold, venturesome, thick skinned and uninhibited all traits under Cattell’s primary factor, social boldness. He knows his one purpose, rather well, and would stick to it out of an inner commitment irrespective of prevailing social perceptions.

Despite the criticism McCourt does not give up on storytelling. The following self argument gives us a clear idea of the dilemma he faces.

I am teaching. Storytelling is teaching.

Storytelling is a waste of time.

I can’t help it. I’m not good at teaching.

You’re a fraud. You’re cheating our children.

They don’t seem to think so.

The poor kids don’t know (26).

These experiences relate to his stint, the very first one, at McKee Vocational and Technical High School, Staten Island, New York City. The time is late fifties and pedagogy then and in the following decades was reason related and analytical. It was only in the last two decades of the preceding century the importance of the
role of emotions has been acknowledged and understood. Today, the method of teaching by storytelling has become the byword. Everyone is talking about it and workshops in the domain abound. That McCourt stood up for what he felt to be the right thing speaks for the importance he attaches to the spirit of autonomy in an individual, a trait usually associated with America but is universal as well.

In identifying an individual, distinguishing characteristics are a definite requirement and here is where traits, attributes come into play. We recognize a person’s greatness or smallness by traits, attributes or characteristics. The ability to recognize particular traits is essential in learning the nature of people. This is a fundamental aspect of education that has been lost sight of in the academia.

McCourt represents the dilemma an English teacher faced then and continues to face till now. Does he stop with teaching grammar and principles of composition or is he also supposed to induce sensitivity and character through literature the appreciation of which is most importantly based on character and our empathic response, notwithstanding all sorts of ideological assaults against such an approach. McCourt in fact fights for a way of teaching that includes person making through instilling emotional, social and interpersonal intelligence. Since the school he works is vocational, McCourt cannot depend on literary classics as the students are least exposed to them. We go to classics for experiences and if there is a set of students who cannot connect to the experiences there then a teacher should resort to experiences which are familiar and which they can link with. This is exactly what McCourt does with his classes. Dealing with nuts and bolts does not need a Whitman or Frost but it definitely needs a person who cares for what he does—a trait, a human quality. As a teacher, McCourt is keenly aware
of this condition and we understand why he compulsively sticks to storytelling.

He speculates:

If I could travel to my twenty seventh year, my first teaching year, I’d take me out for a steak, a baked potato, a pint of stout. I’d give myself a good talking to. For Christ’s sake, kid, straighten up. Throw back those miserable bony shoulders. Stop mumbling. Speak up. Stop putting yourself down. In that department the world will be happy to oblige. You’re starting your teaching career, and it isn’t an easy life. I know. I did it. You’d be better off as a cop. At least you’d have a gun or a stick to defend yourself. A teacher has nothing but his mouth. If you don’t learn to love it, you’ll wriggle in a corner of hell (31-32).

The emphasis given to spoken words upholds the centrality of person to person communication in a classroom. McCourt also suggests that those who want to move up the ladder to occupy administrative positions have no real love for teaching and their moving up is in fact an escape. He is at the same time sensitive to the perils of the profession. Speaking in front of an audience, according to psychologists, is as dreadful as facing death. Failure as a teacher will not be much different from failure as a person. The passage is important in that it advocates an inner driven teaching in contrast to the method driven teaching adopted by the majority.

McCourt’s observations assume special significance in an academic scenario where classroom teaching is pushed to the background with the arrival educational technology supported instructional design. Discussing the findings of Swedish
researchers regarding the tendency of our face muscles to mirror automatically the other’s facial expression Daniel Goleman in his book *Social Intelligence* sums up:

This reflexive imitation opens us to subtle emotional influences from those around us, adding one lane in what amounts to a brain-to-brain bridge between people. Particularly sensitive people pick up this contagion more readily than most, though the impervious may sail through even the most toxic encounter. In either case, this activity usually goes on unnoticed.

We mimic the happiness of a smiling face, pulling our own facial muscles into a subtle grin, even though we may be unaware that we have seen the smile. That mimicked slight smile might not be obvious to the naked eye, but scientists monitoring facial muscles track such emotional mirroring easily. It’s as though our face were being preset, getting ready to display the full emotion.

This mimicry has a bit of biological consequence, since our facial expressions trigger within us the feelings we display. We can stir any emotion by intentionally setting our facial muscles for that feeling: just clench a pencil in your teeth, and you will force your face into a smile, which subtly evokes a positive feeling (2006:18-19).

These research findings underline the value of the presence of a speaking face rich in the affective domain. It makes sense for us to mimic a performer in flesh and blood rather than undergoing prescribed methods or drills. The impact a living voice can leave behind is well understood by McCourt. Humanistic teaching is reasserting itself thanks to cognitive neuroscience. This memoir is a stunning
document of a teacher who never gave up on using the heart to reach despite dominant ideologies that questioned and dismissed this way of teaching.

The consistent references to literary classics in the narrative imply the influence they must have had on McCourt. They also reveal his reading habit. But unlike his generation the present one does not have such a reading habit. Literary texts are read and taught because they provide an emotional-intellectual platform where sharing of experiences are facilitated. As the students are not familiar with such experiences, McCourt has to look for experiences through which he can reach them. This is one of the reasons why he tells stories about his life. The students do not appreciate him on having spent money on a Shakespeare book and for being impressed with the Shakespearean actor who played Hamlet.

My students said spending all that money on a Shakespeare book was dumb, no disrespect intended, and if I wanted to make an impression on people why didn’t I go to the library and copy down all the quotes? Also, you’d have to be pretty dumb to be impressed with a guy just because he quoted this old writer that no one could read anyway. Sometimes they have these Shakespeare plays on TV and you can’t understand a word, so what’s the use? The money I paid for the book could have been spent on something cool like shoes or a nice jacket or, you know, taking a girl to movies (37).

McCourt is well aware where the students stand and understands their difficulties in studying grammar, language and literature. Like most other teachers he does not want to be dismissive treating students as dumb. He uses his childhood and adolescence to draw them into thinking about themselves and life. He makes his life a text for students to discuss issues and ideas.
I never thought much of my life but I went on dolling out bits and pieces of it, my father’s drinking, days in Limerick slums, and I was surprised that New York teenagers asked for more (38).

One special theme that attracts the students toward McCourt is the difficulties of growing up in poverty. Growing up during adolescence is the most difficult stage in one’s life. He refers to the problems of adolescence during the Eisenhower era, the time when he started his career. Books like The Catcher in the Rye also capture the unhappiness of adolescents (13). The generational gap and the consequent problems are real to most of them and hence their interest in McCourt’s stories about his life.

A good teacher, it is expected, should not only instruct but influence students through personality by being a positive model. Learning by observing and recognizing positive traits in someone else is an important aspect in education. Of course, traits manifest themselves in behaviour and action. Moreover, character in action provides a context for learning and that which is learnt thus is imprinted strongly in mind. This type of learning is known as “situated cognition” in the field of education today. This idea comes through the incident involving Billy Campbell, a classmate of McCourt back in Ireland. The schoolmaster there had remarked that McCourt looked like something that the cat brought in. The class laughed with him as it was the habit with students to follow the master. The one trait that we keep coming across in McCourt is his frankness. In this instance too we see the trait.

The master smiled with his great yellow horsy teeth and gobs of phlegm stirred and rattled in his gullet. My classmates took that as a laugh, and when they laughed with him I hated them. I hated the
master, too, because I knew that for days to come I’d be known in
the school yard as the one the cat brought in. If the master had made
that remark about another boy I would have laughed, too, because
I was as great a coward as the next one, terrified of the stick (26).

Going with the herd is a condition difficult to escape for the most. Though playing
it safe saves you from stress and tension for the moment it takes its toll on your
self esteem in the longer run. Living with low self esteem for a long time will
habituate one to such a state leading to misconceiving herd mentality as security,
a phenomenon witnessed in history, an example being the totalitarian government
the extreme form of which is well captured by George Orwell in his 1984. All of
us possess this herd instinct which is “[a] mentality characterized by a lack of
individual decision-making or thoughtfulness, causing people to think and act in
the same way as the majority of those around them” (www.investopedia.com).
Such a mentality is an obstacle to individual development.

The governing quality of frankness in McCourt forces him to view himself,
others, situations, contexts and his interactions with these with unsparing honesty.
This quality comes to the fore in all of his dealings with his students. The relationship
that most requires this quality is friendship and we can see that McCourt’s one
chief intention is to be friends with his students. It is against this attitude his
seniors and superiors warn him against. He remembers the advice of a professor
of education in New York University.

The way you meet and greet your first class might determine the
course of your whole career. Your whole career. They’re watching
you. You’re watching them. You’re dealing with American
teenagers, a dangerous species, and they’ll show you no mercy.
They will take your measure and they will decide what to do with you. You think you’re in control. Think again. They’re like heat-seeking missiles. When they go after you they’re following a primeval instinct. It is the function of the young to get rid of the elders, to make room for the planet...

The best move is to establish as a presence and to do it outside in the hallway. Outside, I say. That’s your territory and when you’re out there you’ll be seen as a strong teacher, fearless, ready to face the swarm. That’s what a class is, a swarm. And you’re a warrior teacher. It’s something people don’t think about. Your territory is like your aura, it goes with you everywhere, in the hallways, on the stairs and, assuredly in the classroom (39-40).

McCourt was then really impressed with professor’s account. It is understandable and the logical neatness of the argument cannot be missed. But logic needs to be validated by experience. When it is time for experiential validation, he deserts the professor’s advice to be a controlling presence. From the sandwich onwards, we find him a person eager and committed to establishing an interpersonal rapport with his students.

The desire to be friends with students is not prompted by any intention to appease which would be a weakness. The seniors and superiors advise McCourt to keep off from students and such keeping off is a defensive response directed by the emotion of fear. Discussing C.S. Lewis’ idea that every friendship labours a danger Prof. Neera Kapur Budhwar observes, “there might be similar hazards in other desirable qualities as well: cowardice in gentleness; harshness in frankness; sloth in amiability; and so on” (5). McCourt steers clear of this pitfall however
much he might try to be friends with his students. It is interesting to note that he is able to do this not on the lines of the experienced seniors but allowing freedom of thought to his adolescent students. Rob Jenkins’ idea about leadership is relevant here. “Being led is one thing, but we don’t want to be dictated, we don’t want to be treated as wayward children, and we don’t want to be sold as a used car (http://chronicle.com). McCourt’s strength lies in leading his students through his and their experiences which includes besides technical skills and subject knowledge self and life skills needed to negotiate the paths one’s life takes. Among the fourteen traits listed by Jenkins we can find that in the protagonist of the memoir almost all the traits with the possible exception of decisiveness and in certain places optimism, the others being listening, inclusiveness, delegation, sincerity, accountability, realism, frankness, self effacement, collegiality, honesty, trustworthiness and morality. Any emergent observation on the memoir would suggest the writer’s success as a teacher and such success would not have been possible without optimism. Hence it would be a reasonable guess to say that whatever optimism is there is thickly veiled by the self deprecatory humour, the hallmark of his style. He allows his students to think and grow instead of forcing them into rigid compartments which explains the rapport he establishes with them and that he does this despite his tentativeness and warning by seniors is admirable.

McCourt ignoring the warning of seniors can be traced back to his admiration for Billy at the school in Ireland. The admiration is owing to the fact that Billy was not enslaved by herd instinct like the others which includes the writer as well. But Billy was a different person.

There was one boy in the class who did not laugh with everyone else: Billy Campbell. When the class laughed, Billy would stare
straight ahead and the master would stare at him, waiting for to be like everyone else. We waited for him to drag Billy from his seat, but he never did. I think the master admired him for his independence. I admired him, too, and wished I had his courage. It never came to me (26-27).

Appreciation and admiration also require a sensitive apprehension of the altruism involved in the action of someone. Billy’s freedom from any habituated thinking allows him to stand up for another person. McCourt was mocked by the boys at the school for the American accent he had from New York. This happened rather too frequently leading to fights in which he invariably ended up with a bloodied nose. So frequent that his only white shirt acquires a “pale shade of pink.” Now he is taunted on the colour of the shirt with the remark that pink is for sissies. Billy stands up for him and asks the boys to leave McCourt alone ready even to fight on his behalf. The incident leaves a strong imprint on McCourt’s mind fine tuning the faculty of recognizing qualities in other persons. It has in fact become a permanent feature in the story of his life. In other words we can call it a turning point moment in his life.

I told stories about Billy because he had the courage I admired.

Then one of the McKee students raised his hand and said it was all right to admire Billy but didn’t I stand up to a whole group over my American accent and shouldn’t I admire myself? I said no, I did only what I had to do with everyone in that Irish school pushing and taunting me, but this fifteen-year-old McKee boy insisted you have to give yourself credit, not too much because that would be bragging. I said, OK, I’d give myself credit for fighting back except
that I wasn’t as brave as Billy, who would fight not for himself but for others. He owed me nothing but still defended me and that was a kind of courage I hoped to have someday (28).

McCourt is driven by the McKee student into awareness of his own courage. The trait of courage he had thought did not exist in him. He was so impressed by the courage like Billy’s that he failed to recognize that courage could exist in lesser acts as well. It never occurred to him that standing up to a gang in spite of getting his nose repeatedly bloodied was courage as well. Probably, better narratives are made of what one admires rather than what is inside oneself which he has not discovered. After the McKee student’s remark McCourt finds that by telling stories about himself and his family he is making discoveries about himself. Stories and narratives help people to discover themselves as maintained by the mirror view of literature. McCourt’s experiences go to validate the old idea. While literary experimental narratives may be anything, actual life narratives happen the way life happens. It is interesting to note that what has not been understood by McCourt from his own experience is made clear to him by a student who learns of it from the stories told by the former about himself. McCourt’s learning of Billy’s courage and the McKee student’s learning of McCourt’s courage are facilitated by narratives. Narratives are thus containers and transmitters of personality traits.

There are complaints from the parents about McCourt telling stories instead of teaching. His business is to teach grammar, punctuation and composition in the classroom but the students are more interested in listening to his life stories. There is also reprimand from superiors. He is caught in a conflict between his head and heart. The absence of immediate output notwithstanding, he decides to oblige his
heart. His is a personality governed by empathy, an important aspect of emotional intelligence. It is one of the five major concepts Goleman lists under emotional intelligence. It is through empathy that he intuitively apprehends that storytelling would be right thing to do in order to make the students accept the classroom as a platform for what can be called whole person participation and learning. His stories earn students’ empathy which in turn enables teacher empathy for students in McCourt paving the way for him to devise ways to teach them vocabulary and writing later. From an interpersonal point of view he gains the confidence of the students and is accepted by them. His stories also provide the necessary experiential links for students to empathize with him.

When I told stories about the docks they looked at me in a different way. One boy said it was funny to think you had a teacher up there that worked like real people and didn’t come from college just talking about books and all (65).

The passage captures accurately a condition prevailing in the present day education scenario around the globe. It brings out an inability relate the knowledge contained in the books to the real world and the experiences there. Much has been said and discussed in this regard but the concern remains. Goleman’s observation helps us comprehend the situation better.

Conventional ideas of social intelligence have too often focused on high-road talents like social knowledge, or the capacity for extracting the rules, protocols, and norms that guide appropriate behavior in a given social setting. The ‘social cognition’ school reduces interpersonal talent to this sort of general intellect applied to interactions. Although this cognitive approach has served well in
linguistics and in artificial intelligence, it meets its limits when applied to human relationships.

A focus on cognition about relationships neglects essential non-cognitive abilities like primal empathy and synchrony, and it ignores capacities like concern. A purely cognitive perspective slight the essential brain-to-brain social glue that builds the foundation of any interaction. The full spectrum of social intelligence abilities embraces both high and low-road aptitudes. Presently both the concept and measures omit too many lanes of the low road—and so exclude social talents that have been key to human survival (2006:100-01).

By “high-road” Goleman means cortical functions and by “low-road” those of the limbic system or the primitive brain. His description fits the view of the senior teachers and superiors (only highroad) and that of McCourt’s (from low-road to high-road). The limbic system has to be properly groomed for a person to have emotional intelligence. The go-by-rules-and-methods teachers we come across in the memoir by refusing to engage the students at an interpersonal level end up alienating their wards. They are also unwilling to take responsibility for their students. Instead they put the blame on the students for their failure to reach them emotionally and intellectually. Interactions and the brain-to-brain glue are their least priority. In contrast, McCourt cares for his students as human beings and takes the low-road first to gain their confidence and then move on to involve them in high-road activities. Researchers at the University of Washington in a breakthrough have created a ‘brain to brain communication’ link. “The ‘brain-to-brain’ connection was established between two persons sitting in different buildings of the
university” (http://thehindu.com). It is possible to argue, based on this research led by Professor Rajesh Rao, that artificial intelligence created by us would help us know ourselves and how our brain functions better. McCourt’s methods of teaching by relying on lived, felt experiences of the students are attempts at tapping into the subconscious energies present in the students. All his unconventional efforts lead in the direction of giving a cognitive-affective platform where the brain-to-brain communication can take place with meaning and purpose.

McCourt is a language teacher and the methodologies to teach handed down to him by education experts fail him as unlike the others he is not willing bulldoze students’ response. In learning a language, tangible rules and drills alone are taught in most cases. It should be said in defence of such methods that letters, words, grammar and syntax are the only teachable elements in a language. Even teaching of meaning has been effectively questioned in recent times. We are still unaware what processes beneath the conscious go into learning a language. Neuroscience and artificial intelligence are making slow but steady progress towards unraveling the mystery. The nonconscious mind is supposed to play a major role in language learning.

The nonconscious mind is the reason we are capable of having—and understanding—so many “unspoken rules” when it comes to social interaction. One excellent example is this is language, grammatical, semantic (or syntactic) rules, idiomatic conventions, innumerable idiosyncrasies and specific linguistic customs that arise from one’s local environment make up a large portion of what we must know in order to communicate effectively with those around us. If all such information had to be processed by conscious mind, simple
conversation would take hours, even days, to form. Our nonconscious learning of these aspects of language are as necessary as they are innate (http://journal psyche.org/).

From the passages quoted in this regard from the memoir it becomes evident that McCourt’s emotional intelligence and intuitive strength make him realize though at a level below the conscious. Through his actions and strategies, considered as going against the norm, he is in fact striving towards making the students to tap into those nonconscious wellsprings that seem to make practiced learning automatic and process the new in quick time and nonstop. For a high-road hassle-free ride, connections with low-road are the sine qua non which fact is not taken into reckoning by experts. And McCourt does right in making students averse to grammar sensitize themselves to what in Chomskian terms be called an unconscious universal grammar.

It is the intuitive grasp of the minds and emotions of students that prompts him not to take recourse to what he calls the “bark and snap.” “If you bark and snap, you lose them. That’s what they get from parents and the schools in general. If they strike back with the silent treatment, you’re finished in the classroom (68). The traits of listening, realism and self effacement foreground themselves here. And McCourt is a person who is very particular about doing the right thing in the manner which takes him into the moral domain as well. Moral observation of his and others’ actions and behaviour is another hallmark quality of McCourt as a person.

McCourt’s first Open School Day gives us an idea of the impact he has had on students that comes through what the parents have heard. Here again we have McCourt using his own experiences to understand the plight of the students and
parents. He knows well that negative comments by him would set the parents against the students. He tells us:

Teachers sat in classrooms talking to parents or listening to their complaints. Most visiting parents were mothers because that job was for the woman. If the mother found her son or daughter misbehaving or not performing well then it would be up to the father to take steps. Of course the father would take steps only with the son. The daughter was a matter for the mother. It wouldn’t be right for a father to knock his daughter around the kitchen or tell her she was grounded for a month. Certain problems belonged to the mother. Also, they had to decide how much information to give the father. If the son was doing poorly and she had a violent husband she might soften her story so that her boy would not wind up on the floor with blood streaming from his nose (70).

From what we learn from accounts of his growing up in a poor family, we can say that the passage demonstrates the empathic activity of using personal experiences to understand others’ difficulties. Depending on the intrapersonal to move to the interpersonal is an effective strategy in counselling and McCourt seems an adept at this. Moreover reporting to the parents and making them face their ire would destroy the trust in the teacher thus precluding interaction. On the surface it might strike us that McCourt is soft pedaling where he should have shown sternness and determination. The traits of listening and inclusiveness make him look like a passive personality. But in the profession he has chosen it would be unwise to be dismissive and judgmental for, that would defeat the very purpose of helping the youth grow. Patience, openness, endurance and perseverance are the traits...
essential for a good teacher and McCourt has them in significant measure. His superiors take the easy way out acting out of a morality by default. They do not think, deliberate and introspect to arrive at the right and the wrong. Instead, they indulge in stereotyping the students in order to typecast them for passing judgments. “I was learning that teachers and kids have to stick together in the face of parents, supervisors and the world in general” (70).

The mother of a boy named Paulie is not happy with McCourt telling stories about himself and Ireland. “These kids don’t need to know the life story of every teacher in the school” (75). She wants her son to be a plumber and would have him learn basic vocabulary and spelling necessary to do the work. McCourt is convinced the woman is right. He resolves to be an English teacher in the conventional mould.

Time to take charge, Enough, I said. Forget this Irish thing.

No more stories. No more nonsense. English teacher is going to teach English and won’t be stopped by little teenage tricks (76).

He decides to teach them parts of speech and writes on the board the sentence, “John went to the store.” He tries to make them identify the subject in the sentence but as is his wont in his classes the interaction leads to Ron composing a little story out of the sentence bringing in a situation and adding characters. Ron’s story shows the qualities of inventiveness. The class applauds and cheers in appreciation. An inspired Ron is not in a mood to give up and takes the story further. He makes John walk into a store to buy a grammar book. Not having the money he tries to walk out with the book but is reported and arrested. He ends the story with his girlfriend Rose “crying her eyes out.”
They made sympathetic sounds. Poor Rose. The boys wanted to know where she could be found and they’d be willing to stand in for John. Girls dabbed at their eyes till Kenny Ball, class tough guy, said it was only a story and what was this bullshit anyway? He said, Teacher writes a sentence on the board and next thing is the guy going to the store robs a book and winds up Sing Song. Who ever heard such bull and is this an English class or what? (79).

When we witness good performances appreciation automatically ensues. Consequently we also mimic what has appealed to us. This is a fundamental way of learning talked about since the time of Plato and Aristotle. McCourt has been telling stories most of the time in the classroom and thus was demonstrating narrative skills to the students. It is also evident from the involvement of the students that they are attracted by his stories. If you appreciate something it means that you have perceived quality in that thing. Once you assign quality to it then the next logical step is that you also want to do a quality thing. When a student is eager to make up a story it is obvious that he wants to demonstrate his ability to use language in a way which is creative and engaging.

The following day sees Ron still interested in the exercise. Kenny Ball’s remarks have had little impact. The story bug seems to have influenced Ron in some kind of a deep way. His response suggests he had continued to dwell on the sentence. “Next day Ron raised his hand again. Hey, teacher, what would happen if you fool around with those words?” Ron asks McCourt to rewrite the sentence as “To the store John went” and then “Went John to the store” and also as “John to the store went.” Ron has woken up to the scope in language for creative play.

We must recall here what students had to say about his spending on a Shakespeare
book and the remark that he could have bought something cool like a pair of shoes. Now Ron does find playing with language ‘cool.’ McCourt shows how the same words can result in gibberish if arranged differently: “John store to the went.” It is a moment of discovery for McCourt too.

I had a sudden idea, a flash. I said, Psychology is the study of the way people behave. Grammar is the study of the way language behaves ...

I pushed it. If someone acts crazy, the psychologist studies them to find out what’s wrong. If someone talks in a funny way and you can’t understand them, then you’re thinking about grammar. Like, John store to the went ...

Proper order means meaning and if you don’t have meaning you’re babbling and the men in the white coats come and take you away. They stick you in the gibberish department of Bellevue. That’s grammar (80).

A casual reading of these pages will miss the point because of the lighter, humorous vein in which McCourt makes his narrative. As already mentioned, self deprecatory humour dominates the memoir and the serious intent has to be ferreted out. Goleman lists self deprecatory humour as one of the traits of self awareness. In fact, McCourt is not wanting on the other two traits of self awareness, self confidence and realistic assessment. These traits become pronounced because McCourt recognizes the emotions aroused in him for what they are.

If self awareness is recognizing emotions within oneself, self regulation is gaining control over one’s emotions. Empathy means recognition of emotions in others. By his stories McCourt has earned the empathic listening of his students.
Their school experience has not given any scope to exercise empathy. But listening to McCourt their empathy is awakened as in Ron’s interest in the John character of the sentence and Donna later continuing it to make John become a grammar teacher at the McKee. Once empathy is activated in them the impulse to give expression to their feelings will not stop. Neuroscience, we have already seen, has established that empathy precedes language as in the case of the social crying of babies just months old. Empathy is a social contagion and McCourt knowingly or unknowingly plants it in the minds of the students the result of which shows in the performances of Ron and Donna. Yet again Goleman’s observation helps us comprehend McCourt’s accomplishment and its relevance.

Now social neuroscience challenges intelligence theorists to find a definition for our interpersonal abilities that encompasses the talents of the low road—including capacities for getting in synch, for attuned listening, and for empathic concern.

These basic elements of nourishing relationships must be included in any full account of social intelligence. Without them the concept remains cold and dry, valuing a calculating intellect but ignoring the virtues of warm heart. On this point I stand with the late psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, who argued that the attempt to eliminate human values from social intelligence impoverished the concept. Then such intelligence devolves into the pragmatics of influence and control. In these anonymous and isolated times we need to be ever vigilant against the spread of that impersonal stance (2006:101).
The explanation involves a comparison between education with humanistic concern and education that concentrates solely on reason and analysis. McCourt in fact concentrates on the low road talents to make his students become empathic listeners leading to nourishing relationships. The teachers who advise McCourt not to trust students and to keep a safe distance from them are the ones who ignore the virtues of the heart and to manage by using the “pragmatics of control.” From the beginning McCourt is seen to resist the “impersonal stance” Goleman is warning us against. Individualized learning and personalized learning are the buzz words in the current scenario and it is interesting to note that a teacher like McCourt has persisted against the impersonal methods of instruction. Though the students do not show interest in studying literary texts McCourt often reveals the influence of classics on him. Right through the memoir we come across titles of great literary texts and the purpose of interspersing the text with them seems to indicate how characters in literature can offer us models of conduct and behavior. In this the memoir becomes not only a defence of humanistic teaching but also defence of humanistic literature.

The “John went to the store” sequence is such a great success and McCourt is justifiably elated. He is especially satisfied when the class cheers on Donna drowning out Ken.

English teachers say if you can teach grammar in a vocational high school you can teach anything anywhere. My classes listened. They participated. They didn’t know I was teaching grammar. Maybe they thought we were just making up stories about John in Sing Song but when they left the classroom they looked at me in a different way. If teaching could be like this every day I might stay till eighty.
Old Silver Locks up there, a bit bent, but don’t underestimate him. Just ask him a question on the structure of the sentence and he will straighten his spine and tell you that story of how he brought psychology and grammar together way back in the middle of the twentieth century (81-82).

Moments like this happen not every day. We struggle to reach our goals and the path is strewn with lots of doubts and uncertainties and it is infrequent that we question the possibility of our attempt ever bearing fruits. But perseverance takes us to that moment in which the goal is realized and the uncertainties disappear as if by magic. While track record and experience were against what McCourt wanted to do with his students, gumption told him to persist and it pays off. He overcomes student apathy to learning and brings about total involvement. It is a moment of epiphany akin to what David Brooks calls the “agency moment.” Explaining how an emotionally needy George Eliot became a person of self assertion, Brooks points out the difficulty experienced by many in developing the confidence to control their destinies.

So many people are struggling for agency. They are searching for the solid criteria that will help them make their own judgments. They are hoping to light an inner fire that will fuel relentless action in the same direction ... Agency is not automatic. It has to be given birth to, with pushing and effort. It’s not just the confidence and drive to act. It’s having engraved inner criteria to guide action. The agency moment can happen at any age. I guess that’s when adulthood starts (9).
We have already seen that McCourt is a person who prefers to follow inner directions rather than conforming to the accepted conceptions of normality. In spite of indications otherwise he never gives up and he reaches his moment of agency after his success with the students. It should be noted that teaching is a profession where you succeed by enabling others succeed. McCourt takes hold of his destiny by putting students on the way to finding control over their destinies. He achieves this by a process which Abraham Maslow calls “a kind of emotional contagion in isomorphic parallel” (84).

Another innovation that McCourt thinks of and executes is the exercise in writing. Typical academic writing is resisted by the students as they do against all other impersonal methods of instruction. It occurs to McCourt that most of the excuse notes that come to him are not written by the parents but by students themselves. Once again he has a moment of epiphany. Why not design a writing exercise with this?

The drawer was filled with samples of American talent never mentioned in song, story or scholarly study. How could I have ignored this treasure trove, these gems of fiction, fantasy, creativity, craw thumping, self-pity, family problems, boilers exploding, ceilings collapsing, fires sweeping whole blocks, babies and pets pissing on homework, unexpected births, heart attacks, strokes, miscarriages, robberies? Here was American high school writing at its best—raw, real, urgent, lucid, brief, lying ... (85).

The strategy arrived at by the writer is tune with the ruling educational philosophy of going down to the students’ experiential field to devise suitable exercise. If understanding is the backbone of all learning then it makes perfect sense to
make them write on something they already know and are familiar with. After deliberating, McCourt decides to give them an interesting writing assignment and tells the students that they need not complete it within the class time. They can take it home to complete it. The topic for the assignment is written on the board: “An Excuse Note from Adam to God” or “An Excuse Note from Eve to Adam.” It has immediate effect.

The heads went down. Pens raced across paper. They could do this with one hand tied behind their backs. With their eyes closed. Secret smiles around the room. Oh, this is a good one, baby, and we know what’s coming, don’t we? Adam blames Eve. Eve blames Adam. They both blame God or Lucifer. Blame all around except for God, who has the upper hand and kicks them out of Eden so that their descendents wind up in McKee Vocational and Technical High School writing excuse notes for the first man and woman, and maybe God himself needs an excuse note for some of His big mistakes. The bell rang, and for the first time in my three and a half years of teaching, I saw high school students so immersed they had to be urged out of the room by friends hungry for lunch (87).

Next day no student has neglected the excuse note. They had continued with enthusiasm and some of them had gone beyond the topics given by the teacher. There are excuse notes written by God to Lucifer. There are a variety of tones. Some are compassionate and some nasty. McCourt as a teacher is impressed and happy for he has succeeded again. They want more of the exercise and McCourt suggests Eva Braun, Judas, Attila the Hun, Lee Harvey Oswald and Al Capone and all the politicians in America. They even want names of teachers.
“Yo, Mr. McCourt, could you put teachers up there? Not you but all these pain-in-the-ass teachers that be giving us tests every day” (89). When the assignment is in progress the principal and the Superintendent of Staten Island visit his class. McCourt is highly apprehensive. The Superintendent picks up a student paper and tells something to the principal. And when the principal tells McCourt the Superintendent would like to see him he gets a fright. “I know. I know. I’ve done something wrong again. The shit will hit the fan and I don’t know why. There will be a negative letter in my file” (89). But McCourt is in for a pleasant surprise. The Superintendent pays him a series of compliments calling his work “top notch,” “down to earth teaching” and that the writing is at the “college level.”

He turns to the principal and says, That kid writing an excuse note for Judas. Brilliant. But I have a reservation or two. I’m not sure if the writing of the excuse notes for evil or criminal people is justifiable or wise, though on second thoughts, it’s what lawyers do, isn’t it? And from what I have seen your class you might have some promising future attorneys there. So, I want to shake your hand and tell you don’t be surprised if there’s a letter in your file attesting to your energetic and imaginative teaching (90).

He was right about expecting a letter but not about the content of it. The fright he feels in fact goes to prove that he has been doing what his heart told was right in spite of the possible ire he might have attracted for being unconventional. It is a triumph of spirit for a teacher whose concern has always been the development of students rather than completing the work and testing.

A teaching career is not without poignant moments. The account of Kevin Dunne touches the heart. Considered an impossible case Kevin is shunned by all
the teachers. No one likes to have him in his class. So, he is sent to the new teacher McCourt who too finds him to be a trouble in the class. McCourt gives him responsibilities. He makes him the classroom manager. He finishes his work very fast. McCourt finds out that Kevin is attracted by colours. The water colour jars fascinate him and McCourt allows him to clean them and even to take them home. Kevin is moved and his cheeks are wet. He does not return and is sent to a special school. Later he is enlisted and goes to Vietnam where he gets himself in the missing list. His mother meets him and shows him a photograph. The picture shows the glass jars arranged so that they say “MCCORT OK.” The mother leaves a jar with McCourt which he keeps on his desk. What follows is plain narration of the fate of the jar. There are three different responses to Kevin’s story.

I kept the jar on my desk, where it glowed, incandescent, and when I looked at clumps of Kevin’s hair I felt sorry over the way I let him drift out of the school and off to Vietnam. My students, especially girls, said the jar was beautiful, yeah, a work of art, and it must have taken a lot of work. I told them about Kevin and some of the girls cried. A maintenance man cleaning the classroom thought the jar was junk and took it away to the trash in the basement.

I talked to the teachers in the cafeteria about Kevin. They shook their heads. They said, Too bad. Some of these kids slip through the cracks but what the hell is the teacher supposed to do? We have huge classes, no time, and we’re not psychologists (99-100).

The tragedy of potential wasted is obvious. The irony that comes through the juxtaposing of the three different responses is striking. There is no condemning of the maintenance man or the teachers. The former has no knowledge of the story
behind the jar. It is probable that the writer wants us to know how stories add value to life. The response of the teachers captures the wasteland quality of life in the present times. They are not willing to take moral responsibility. Modern life is such that such moral feelings are not affordable. McCourt is not judgmental in his description of fellow teachers. Their behaviour is explainable against the kind of students they have to face, the institutional targets and the huge number of students that have to be handled. Accepting responsibility for such a large number will take its toll on one’s psychic energy leading to breakdown. McCourt is drawing attention to the circumstances that do not allow a person to use his moral cognition and knowledge in “actual representation and evaluation of human acts and institutions and other forms of actual behavior” (Mikhail 15).

The memoir also contains brief accounts of McCourt’s personal life like his affair with June Somers, life at the docks and his marriage with Alberta Small but the focus is always on his career showing the teacher, and more important the teacher as a man. After eight years at the McKee, he shifts to New York Community College as an adjunct lecturer. He accepts the offer though the salary is only half that of the school teacher. His job is to teach two courses—Introduction to Literature and Basic Composition—to working students who are adults. He has an uneventful stint as a college teacher which ends within a year. While he desperately tries to get them write original research papers, they respond with an “ecstasy of plagiarism” (120). From here he goes to Fashion Industries High School and then to Sewark Park High School. His doctoral programme at Dublin University fails too. Where ever he works McCourt continues with his innovative methods. At the Fashion Industries High School, he tries to teach the structure of a sentence on the analogy of the ball point pen. He tries to explain the
connection between structure and function. This attempt again shows his trait of
doing unconventional, alternative thinking.

Then McCourt finds appointment in a famous high school, Stuyvesant.
This school has reputation. “If you asked the boys and girls at Stuyvesant to write
three hundred and fifty words on any subject they might respond with five
hundred” (187). Though he had promised that he would stay only for two years,
McCourt continues at Stuyvesant. In the mean time his marriage collapses. He gets
to teach creative writing as well. McCourt describes his becoming an experienced
teacher in his characteristic vein—humorous and understating.

After fifteen years in four different high schools ... and the college
in Brooklyn, I’m developing the instincts of a dog. When new
classes come in September and February I can sniff their chemical
composition. I watch the way they look and watch the way I look.
I can pick out types: the eager, willing ones; the cool; the show-me;
the indifferent; the hostile; the opportunists here because they’ve
heard I’m an easy marker ... (202).

This passage gains significance if we go back and remember McCourt in the initial
days at the McKee. He is no more bewildered but the will to be always a man, a
human being to his students is never compromised. He continues in the spirit
enshrined in the title of the memoir. To be a good teacher according to him is all
about remaining free from defensiveness and wearing masks.

You can fool some of the kids some of the time, but they know
when you’re wearing the mask, and you know they know. They
force you into truth. If you contradict yourself they’ll call out. Hey,
that’s not what you said last week. You face years of experience and
their collective truth, and if you insist on hiding behind the teacher mask you lose them. Even if they lie to themselves and the world they look for honesty in the teacher (203).

This honesty is an essential quality of a good teacher. If a person is uncomfortable being himself while performing then he will definitely suffer. This is the reason why McCourt asks us not to wear masks. This trait is insisted upon in the teaching called the experiential method. The method is now best known by Kolb’s learning cycle—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation and then back to concrete experience to repeat the cycle. This type of learning is participatory and we see McCourt doing this again and again. In this method, to be an effective teacher “is to develop the courage and confidence to be yourself and then to accept responsibility for self and finally to learn to deal with others as they are” (Clawson 226). McCourt’s progression as a teacher coincides with his growth as an individual. To have influence on the students the teacher has to be a man of integrity and students will be convinced of it only on observation on a long term basis. The teacher has to be consistent and as already pointed out by McCourt he cannot afford to contradict himself. The courage to take one’s real self when dealing with others is the mark of a well evolved individual and McCourt finally comes to exercise the kind of influence on his students solely because of this quality. The “John went to the store,” the ball pen analogy, the exercise in excuse note writing and later writing the recipe and setting it to tune are all experiential tasks. Besides the method, the students are convinced of the genuine care McCourt has for them and this acts as fuel to their participating with passion and commitment. The major reason for the success of
McCourt is his honesty in all his dealings with the students. There are very many things cool for the young students but nothing as cool as an honest, caring teacher.

McCourt shows concern for inducing critical thinking skills in his students. Getting them to do it with literary classics has not helped for, they cannot have emotional-experiential links with them. The typical academic-scholarly method only makes them resist. So, McCourt thinks it fit to start with shareable authentic experience.

There are two basic ways of capturing the attention of the American teenager: sex and food. You have to be careful with sex. Word goes back to the parents and you’re called on the carpet to explain why you’re allowing your writing students to read stories about sex. You point out that it was done in good taste, in the spirit of romance rather than biology. That is not enough (204).

Food is the universal progenitor of warm and lively conversations. Kenny DiFalco’s offer of a marzipan sets in motion a chorus of offers to bring food. It builds up as a mini food fair in the park. The police stop to enquire and McCourt tells them it is a vocabulary lesson. They taste kimchee and want to know how often will be these vocabulary lessons. The onlookers too become curious and this sets McCourt thinking. He has a new idea.

I stood on a park bench to announce my new idea. I had to compete with student chatter, the mumbling and complaining of the homeless, the remarks of the curious public, the hot and honk of Second Avenue traffic.

Listen. Are you listening? Tomorrow I’d like you to bring to class a cookbook. Yes. A cookbook. What? You don’t have a cookbook?
Well, then, I’d like to plan a visit to the family that doesn’t own a cookbook. We’ll take up a collection for you. Don’t forget, tomorrow the cookbook (206).

The students think it audacious but the curiosity is kindled nevertheless. The next day sees the students with recipe books and what follows is more confounding. They are asked to read the recipes in the classroom. After bewilderment they participate with vigour.

The class is alive. They tell one another this is wild, the very idea of reading recipes, reciting recipes, singing recipes with Michael adjusting his flute to French, English, Spanish, Jewish, Irish, Chinese recipes. What if someone walked in? Those Japanese educators who come and stand in the back of the room and watch teachers teach. How would the principal explain Susan and Michael and the Meatball Concerto? (209).

The students become fully involved and Brian who tries to dampen the mood has no supporters. He too joins the group and promises to play the oboe. The students do understand the intention of the teacher. Susan says she knows the reason.

Because they look like poetry on the page and some of them read like poetry. I mean they’re even better than poetry because you can taste them. And, wow, the Italian recipes are pure music.

Maureen McSherry chimes in. The other thing I like about the recipes is you can read them the way they are without pain-in-the-ass English teachers digging for the deeper meaning. (208)
The important aspect of learning is to think, understand and execute. The recipe sessions have made the students do exactly that. With formal learning the students do not have the opportunity to do their own thinking but are expected to conform to academic routines. Conformity does not offer scope for taking responsibility for what they do. McCourt’s unconventional methods succeed where the formal ones fail. The recipe sessions see students doing their own “stuff.” They have control over what they do. In other words McCourt creates opportunities for the students to arrive at their agency moments. It is experiences such as these that make McCourt a significant memory in the students though it might be of a man who “turned his classroom into a playground, a rap session and group therapy forum” (211). If education is all about producing responsible, thinking, self aware, self regulated and autonomous individuals then McCourt has more than done his job.

The purpose of reading literature is to develop appreciation and critical thinking skills. The recipe concert session is followed by feedback time during which constructive criticism is not wanting. The news has spread and students of other classes are curious too. But McCourt becomes apprehensive.

They said kids in other classes wished they could read recipes instead of Alfred Lord Tennyson and Thomas Carlyle. Other English teachers were teaching solid stuff, analyzing poetry, assigning research papers and giving lessons on the correct use of footnotes and bibliography.

Thinking of those other English teachers and the solid stuff makes me uneasy again. They’re following the curriculum, preparing the kids for higher education and the great world beyond. We’re not here to enjoy ourselves teacher man (213).
But the exercise has had its effect. Reflecting on what one has done and what others have done has opened up the introspective space in the students. They have learnt to criticize in order to improve and also to be receptive. The critical faculty made aware in themselves by the recipe rap can now be applied to other domains. What they did with recipes was to have experiences and in the process they have learnt to analyze their experiences. And they can bring that to bear upon what they do elsewhere as well.

The domain shift begins with the nursery rhyme Little Bo Peep. Asked to explain, the students as usual are initially flabbergasted but go ahead prompted by McCourt. The deeper meaning of trusting and leaving alone is found in the rhyme, a meaning very relevant to the students in the American context. From here they further move to Hansel and Gretel. The fairy tale gives the shared ground required. “Everyone in the class seemed to have an opinion on the Hansel and Gretel story and the main question was, Would you tell this story to your children?” (218). The class divides itself into two groups—one anti and another pro. There follows a lively and passionate debate crowned with the statement by Lisa Berg. “She said kids have stuff in their heads so dark and deep it’s beyond our comprehension.” A statement so profound is the result of thinking that started with recipes, rap and nursery rhyme.

They knew Lisa had hit on something. They weren’t so far removed from childhood themselves, although they wouldn’t like to hear you say it, and you could sense in that silence a drifting back to a childhood dreamland (218).

It becomes evident that the students have learnt to create an interface between their real-life experiences and what they read, the very purpose of the “solid stuff”
done by other English teachers. Lisa Berg has achieved an insight that can make a seasoned professor proud. And the students have witnessed the process of insight making happen in front of them through different phases. Learning is not about following correct procedures alone but more importantly making thoughts, concepts, skills and talents take residence in a person. And this is exactly what McCourt achieves with his students.

Doubts do not subside in McCourt still. Assuming the role of the Assistant Deputy Superintendent of Pedagogy at the Board of Education he writes himself a stiff letter asking him to present himself with “a union representative and/or a lawyer.” At last McCourt comes to his subject. He asks Stanley to read Theodore Roethke’s poem “My Papa’s Waltz.” The poem is about a working class drunken father roughly waltzing his son to bed. He says, “Thanks again Stanley. Take a few minutes to look over the poem again. Let it sink in. So, when you read the poem, what happened?” The students are not sure of what the teacher means. He goes on.

You read the poem. Something happened, something moved in your head, in your body, in your lunch box. Or nothing happened. You’re not required to respond to every stimulus in the universe. You’re not weather vanes ...

I’d like you to talk about whatever you’d like to talk about in the general neighborhood of the poem. Bring in your grandmother if you like. Don’t worry about the ‘real’ meaning of the poem. Even the poet won’t know that. When you read it something happened, or nothing happened. Would you raise your hand if nothing happened? All right, no hands. So, something happened in your head or heart or

You look at a child rebelling against his mother. You see a homeless man begging. You see a politician giving a speech. You ask someone to go out with you. You observe the response of the other person. Because you’re a writer, you ask yourself always, What’s happening baby” (221).

This passage can very well be called the climactic moment in the narrative. From the beginning the students have resisted formal instruction and McCourt too has always viewed it with suspicion. We see him throughout as a person who cannot do what his heart will not approve. He has consistently tried to make the students have felt experiences and led to them to reflect on and discuss them. First it was stories about his own childhood, and then the ‘John went to the store’ drill, the ball pen analogy, recipe rap, nursery rhyme, fairy tales and finally the Roethke poem.

He has been an effective experiential learner as well as an experiential teacher.

Responses and interpretations follow the leading participant this time being Jonathan. He is perceptive enough to tell McCourt, “Yeah, I figured this poem had something to do with your childhood” (222). Students understand the background of the poem and are able to offer significant comments. In the passage quoted above McCourt has drawn attention to the fact that a poem is capable of influencing a person at the physical, emotional and intellectual levels when he tells the students that “something happened in your head or heart or your bowels.” He has successfully demonstrated that poetry is a medium that captures the living experience and not classroom, examination fodder. He has not coerced his students
into knowledge but has helped them journey toward it. Their knowledge is an experientially earned one and it is going to stay with them as long as they live.

McCourt’s success as a teacher is borne out by two instances. The first involves Ken, the Korean student. Ken has a domineering father who he had obliged all along. But when it came to joining the university he made his own choice. He went to Stanford against the wishes of his father who wanted him in Harvard or MIT. Ken writes to his teacher and later visits him at his school. He tells how McCourt had helped him get through the last year of school and also how he now understands the hardships his father must have faced to educate his children. A presence thought to be oppressive by him is now understood as sacrifice thanks to empathy. McCourt reports on Ken’s experience of talking about his favourite poem in an English class at Stanford.

... when Ken was called on by the professor to talk about a favorite poem, what popped up in his memory was ‘My Papa’s Waltz’ and, Jesus, it was too much, he broke down and wept in front of all those people, and the professor was terrific, put his arm around Ken’s shoulder and led him down the hallway to his office till he could recover. He stayed an hour in the professor’s office, talking and crying, the professor saying it was OK, he had a father he thought was a mean son-of-a-bitch Polish Jew, forgetting that that mean son-of-a-bitch survived Auschwitz and made his way to California and raised the professor and two other kids, ran a delicatessen in Santa Barbara, every organ in his body threatening to collapse, undermined in the camp. The professor said their two fathers would have a lot to talk about but that would never happen. The Korean
grocier and the Polish-Jewish delicatessen man could never find the words that come so easily in a university. Ken said a huge weight was lifted in the professor’s office (242).

The whole memoir, as we have seen, revolves around the concept of empathy. McCourt starts his career with stories of his life the purpose probably being earning the listening of the students. Initial objections apart, he succeeds and the stories get to be demanded. He builds his entire pedagogy around empathy. All his exercises are in this area. The transformation brought in Ken is initiated by McCourt’s use of Roethke’s poem. And the moment comes in his life when he tries to talk about his favourite poem at Stanford. And the professor’s empathy for his own father and for Ken accentuates the centrality of empathy in all human transactions. McCourt’s choice of instruction is finally vindicated here.

The empathy approach is widely used in social and emotional learning. Borje Holmberg’s empathy approach in distance learning has been around for a few decades now. For Ken it is very much a therapeutic release. That the moment comes long after its introduction also speaks for the lasting imprint left by McCourt’s exercise. The other instance is Phyllis’ account of how her father died while they were watching Armstrong on the moon. While others were watching the TV she had gone to check on her father only to find him dead. Completely shocked she had no idea as to how to break the news to the happy people watching the event. She could not cry or scream. She had written about this to McCourt. But now standing before the class she lets go and starts weeping, a moment of exquisite and extreme poignancy which McCourt will cherish forever. McCourt’s students have grown up to be sensitive, caring and self actualized human beings.
Education as suggested in the memoir is earning a sense of release to grow and become autonomous. Writing is one of the modes of gaining release. In the excuse note writing exercise the students are seen to enjoy this release. Freedom always brings joy. For McCourt writing is not just a simple academic training. It is an urge become free by expressing.

Every moment of your life, you’re writing. Even in your dreams you’re writing. When you walk the halls in this school you meet various people and write furiously in your head. There’s the principal. You have to make a decision, a greeting decision. Will you nod? Will you smile? Will you say Good morning, Mr. Baumel? Or will you simply say, Hi? You see someone you dislike. Furious writing again in your head. Decision to be made. Turn your head away? Stare as you pass? Nod? Hiss a Hi? You see someone you like and you say, Hi, in a warm melting way, a Hi that conjures up splash of oars, soaring violins, eyes shining in the moonlight. There are so many ways of saying Hi. Hiss it, trill it, bark it, sing it, bellow it, laugh it, cough it. A simple stroll in the hallway calls for paragraphs, sentences in your head, decisions galore (245).

McCourt makes writing an organic activity. He is also indirectly suggesting here how we make a natural activity an excruciatingly a laborious one. Curriculum should make writing an enjoyable activity. It might help as it does in the students writing excuse notes so much so the one written to Judas earns praise for McCourt. The passage is an invitation to all of us to look within, observe what happens and write them to our heart’s content.
The following traits are seen in McCourt: self deprecatory humour, frankness, honesty, proactiveness, adventurism, innovativeness, empathy, insightfulness, inferential acumen, absence of defensiveness, self pity but an honest admission of it, emotional intelligence, ethical thinking, both introversion and extraversion.

In short, he is one who is keen to keep the balance between the head and the heart.