The "Excuse Notes" in *Teacher Man*

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ABSTRACT

In McCourt's Teacher Man, the students in the school, where McCourt works as a teacher, are reluctant to write any writing tasks, either in class or at home, due to their difficulties in completing them. However, when writing the assignments of McCourt's course, the students suddenly become brilliant, and what they produce is considered by the teacher as the finest American prose. More importantly, rather than having a genuine desire to write assignments, the students' desperate longing for McCourt's course assignments is solely motivated by their hope for exemption from any assignments, so their psychology and behaviour are paradoxical. Based on Erika Fromm's theory of dreams and wish-fulfillment, this paper uncovers that the reason why McCourt's students have a desperate craving for writing the assignment in his course, which is writing excuse notes, is that it is a process to address their personal problems that cannot be solved in the real world. Moreover, according to the concept of Outcome Based Education (OBE), one of the goals of education is to equip students with the abilities and competencies to solve the problems they are faced with outside of school. Therefore, this paper will explore the problems that McCourt's students want to resolve in the real world through an analysis of the events described in the fake excuse notes written by the students themselves and the social situation of their time, in order to enlighten teachers about the types of abilities and competencies that students must cultivate for their growth and development.

KEYWORDS: *Teacher Man; excuse notes; outcome based education; wish-fulfillment.*

INTRODUCTION

As "a major novel about teaching" (Mottart 493), Frank McCourt's *Teacher Man* narrates the experiences of McCourt as "an English teacher" in New York during the 1960s and 1970s (Mottart 496). It not only emerges as "an autobiographical Bildungsroman", where the protagonist is perpetually on a quest for self-discovery as "a teacher and human being", but alsoan account of "the American teaching system of the 1960s and 1970s" (Mottart 496). The novel centers on how McCourt struggles to find the "right way" to "interact with young people" (Cohen 174), in order to maintain the "classroom discipline" (Mottart 496).While the approach McCourt implemented, according to Pariser, aligns with some educational theory(301), Mottart pointed out that there persists a conflict between the theoretical knowledge and practical experience (496). This, in Pariser's opinion, reveals the detachment of educational theory from practice (301). Pariser further elucidated the two factors resulting in this estrangement: firstly, more often than not, theory is regarded as overly "abstract" and "distant" from the crucial "moments" that make up a teacher's work; secondly, certain academics use "obscure", inaccessible, and sometimes "nonsensical language" which serve as a "safe ground" for their professional solitude (Pariser 309). Accordingly, Pariser argued that some parts of the novel pave the way for a "correction" of the abstract educational theory(308).

Mottart emphasized that the "fictional narratives" in *Teacher Man*provides the "empathy" between teachers in the ways that "theoretical textbooks" do not offer, so "pre-service teachers were invited to read *Teacher Man*" (493).

The analysis will be conducted on the selected passages in Chapter 6 of *Teacher Man*. In this novel, students are normally unenthusiastic or reluctant about writing assignments in the school where McCourt works as a teacher. However, they suddenly develop a strong desire for write the assignment of McCourt's course. More importantly, during the process of writing such assignments, the students suddenly become "brilliant", and what they produce is considered by the teacher as "the finest American prose" (McCourt 57). The psychology and behavior of these students who experience a sudden increase in motivation to write assignments is paradoxical, because theirdesperate craving for McCourt's course assignments stems entirely from their wish for an exemption from all assignments.

By examining the paradoxical behavior of McCourt's students and the inner tensions it reveals, this thesis will investigate the reasons why McCourt can enhance students' internal drive to write assignments. According to Freud, "night-dreams" operate and function in the same manner as "daydreams" and creative writing (424-427). He put forward that dreams themselves are the fulfillment of the dreamers' unfulfilled desires (Freud 424-427). Disagreeing with Freud's

opinion, Erika Fromm argued that dreams are the process of struggling to achieve the fulfillment of unfulfilled wishes (207). Fromm emphasized thatevery dream or fantasy is simply an effort to handle a problem unresolved in real world, and wish-fulfillment is one of the possible outcomes of such dreams or fantasies (207). Fromm's theory of dreams and wish-fulfillment provides a perspective for this paper to uncover the reason why McCourt's students have a desperate craving for writing assignments of his course: it is a way for them to address personal problems that cannot be solved in the real world.

Moreover, in *Teacher Man*, what concerns McCourt is how to motivate students adhere to discipline and make their learning outcomes align with the curriculum. Nevertheless, Spady pointed out that "schools"are expected to ensure that all students are equipped with the "competence and qualities" needed to tackle the "challenges" they will encounter outside the school environment(9). To achieve this goal, "schools" must adjust their operational approaches (Spady 9). Therefore, this paper will probe into the challenges that students may face off campus, based on the events described in their excuse notes and the social background of their times which plays a crucial role in shaping their thoughts and actions, so that schools can gain an insight into the competence and qualities that students need to develop to deal with these challenges.

THE STUDENTS' PARADOXICAL MOTIVE FOR WRITING THE ASSIGNMENT

Initially, students "resist any kind of writing assignment in class or at home", because "They are struggling when writing assignments" (McCourt 57). For this reason, their teacher, McCourt, often receives excuse "notes written on every size and color of paper, scrawled, scratched, stained" from his students. He "made two piles, one for the genuine notes written by mother, the other forgeries. The second was the larger pile" (McCourt 57). Students write excuse notes for themselves, as "Parents getting kids out of the house in the morning have little time for writing notes" (McCourt 57). The teacher finds that "those notes" written by students themselves are so excellent that they can be praised as "American high school writing at its best" and even "the finest American prose" (McCourt 57). On the contrary, when these students write any assignments, "it's hard" for them to put "two hundred words together on any subject" (McCourt 57).

In the light of this fact, McCourt begins to ask his students to write excuse notes as assignments. They can make "excuses" for "the rest of" their "life" or for their "own children when they're late or absent or up to some devilment" (McCourt 58), imaging that they "have a fifteen-year-old son or daughter who needs an excuse for falling behind in English" (McCourt 57-58). The teacher continues to assign them write "An Excuse Note from Eve to God" or "An Excuse Note from Adam to God"(McCourt 59).The students "didn't look around. They didn't chew on their pens. They didn't dawdle. They were

eager, desperate to" write McCourt's assignment(McCourt 59). Their "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"(McCourt 59). They say that "More, more. Could we do more"(McCourt 59). It reveals that McCourt's students suddenly have a thirst for writing his assignment.

Nevertheless, their passion for McCourt's assignments is by no means merely caused by itscreative form and content. To uncover the true impetus for completing McCourt's assignments, it is necessary to examine the inner tensions revealed by the students' paradoxical actions: their desperate craving for writing McCourt's "assignments" is fueled by their thirst for an exemption from "assignments". Just like the "biblical paradox that you must lose your life in order to gain it"(Tyson 138), which paradoxically foregrounds that a person can "gain an object" only through "losing it"(Tyson 139). Seeming "self-contradictory", the paradox means that by relinquishing the temporal and fleeting "life of the flesh", one attains a far more significant kind of life: the everlasting "life of the soul" (Tyson 139). Students do not want to do homework, but violations of school regulations can lead to suspension or expulsion. They, therefore, must repress their wish and complete assignments unwillingly and passively. However, despite repression, students still experience negative emotions due to their unfulfilled desire for exemption from assignments.

According to Freud, "night-dreams" operate and function in the same manner as "daydreams" and creative writing, because "night-dreams" are the fulfillment of "wishes of which" individuals "are ashamed", and unfulfilled wish "finds its fulfillment in the creative work" and daydreaming (Freud 424-427). McCourt's students tend to finds the fulfillment of their wish for the exemption of assignments through creative writing assigned by the teacher. Nevertheless, their wish to eliminate assignments cannot be fulfilled through creative writing in the real world. Although the students' wish is not fulfilled, they still have a desperate craving for writing McCourt's assignment, which violates Freud's theory.

Erika Fromm's theory of dreams and wish-fulfillment offers a novel perspective that sheds light on why students desire to complete the assignments in McCourt's course, even if their wishes are not granted by doing so. Fromm disagreed with Freud's view that dreams are wish-fulfillment, instead seeing them as a process of struggling to achieve such fulfillment. He argued that every dream or fantasy is simply an effort to handle a problem unresolved in real world (207). Wish-fulfillment is one of the possible outcomes of such dreams or fantasies (Fromm 207). Based on Fromm's perspective, creative writing is a way to address their personal problems that cannot be solved in actual world.

McCourt's students like writing the assignments of his course, because they feel satisfied with the process of writing for which represents the process of handling the unresolved problem of theirsand even of the next generations: When

writing the assignments, they can "make up excuses for their fifteen-year old sons and daughters. It was an act of loyalty and love and, you never know, some day they might need these notes"(McCourt 59). As long as their wish is not fulfilled through writing the assignments, their enthusiasm for the assignments will continue, because the unresolved problem will constantly tempt them to write the assignment. In a word, the latent motivation of McCourt's students for writing the assignments is their wish for solving their personal problems that cannot be addressed in real world.

THE STIMULI FOR LEARNING MOTIVATION REVEALED BY THE EXCUSE NOTES

"Traditional" education "systems" typically feature a curriculum structure that is largely predefined, with an established "assessment and credentialing system" (Spady 6).In other words, "curriculum and assessment systems" themselves are generally treated as standalone objectives, rather than means to achieve broader educational goals(Spady 6). These systems often lack a clear focus on well-defined outcomes that are expected of all students (Spady 6). This is the reason why, in *Teacher Man*, McCourt's students were initially reluctant to write any assignments. On the contrary, the theory of Outcome Based Education (OBE) lays emphasis on what students are capable of doing by applying "what they know and have learned" (Spady 2). In *Teacher Man*, the students' motivation to complete the assignments of McCourt's course suddenly spikes, as these assignments cater to their need to address personal problems that they can't in the real world. This aligns with the theory of Outcome Based Education and proves that being able to solve real-world problems by applying what they know and have learned is the source of their learning motivation.

For these reasons, to boost students' learning motivation, educators should first identify the real-world issues students want to deal with. An analysis of the content of the fictitious excuse notes written by McCourt's students can uncover the real-world problems that students of that era faced, shedding light on how to increase students' learning motivation in that era: The "honest excuse notes from parents" in McCourt's eyes are "usually dull"(McCourt 58), while the fictitious ones from the students are praised by the teacher as"fluent, imaginative, clear, dramatic, fantastic, focused, persuasive", "useful", "raw, real, urgent, lucid" and "brief" (McCourt 57). Meyer H. Abrams pointed out that the "truth" of poetry is different from the "truth" of science (Abrams 317). Science is true, because it transcribes the "fact" of the outside world (Abrams 317), "a particular situation that exists" or a "thing" that can "prove" to be "true" instead of being "invented" (Hornby 763). However, the "truth" of poetrylies in its "sincere" reflection of the poet's inner state, including his "preferences", "volition" and "power" (Abrams 317-318), and these inner state is the "result" of his "direct impression or perception" of fact in outside world (Abrams 320). As Horace said, "If you would have me weep, you must first show grief yourself". It corresponds to Carlyle's opinion

that if a person intends to "move and convince others", he should "be first moved and convinced" by "himself" (Abrams 72).Therefore, the reason why McCourt praises the excuse notes written by the students as "real" and "persuasive" is that the students infuse their excuse notes with genuine emotion, although the events depicted in them are fictitious, as shown in the following excerpts of the students' excuse notes:

"The stove caught fire and the wallpaper went up and the fire department kept us out of the house all night" (McCourt 56).

"The toilet was blocked and we had to go down the street to the Kilkenny Bar where my cousin works to use their toilet but that was blocked too from the night before and you can imagine how hard it was for my Ronnie to get ready for school. I hope you'll excuse him this one time and it won't happen again. The man at the Kilkenny Bar was very nice on account of how he knows your brother, Mr. McCord" (McCourt 56).

"Arnold doesn't have his work today because he was getting off the train yesterday and the door closed on his school bag and the train took it away" (McCourt 57-58). "He yelled to the conductor who said very vulgar things as the train drove away. Something should be done" (McCourt 58).

What written in their excuse notes as shown in the excerpt above is lie, because it is not the "fire", "blocked" toilet or "train" that prevent them from writing assignments. According to Abrams, the eyes of scientists passively receive the fact, so "scientific discourse" reflects data without any emotion (315). On the contrary, "poetic discourse" reflects data with "emotional additions", so the fact depicted by a poem must have been "supplemented or modified" by "passion or feeling" presented in the describer's mind(Abrams 315). In this sense, the fake events described in the students' excuse notes represent the reality that has been modified by the students' emotions produced during their reactions to the real situation of the outside world.

An analysis of what is described in their excuse notes can help to reveal the real situation of their society. The "fire department", the closed "door" of the "train", and the "blocked" toilet disrupt the daily life of the students and their family. Furthermore, each excuse note does not have narrative closure, because they do not mention whether the student eventually found a usable toilet or not, nor do they indicate whether the student ultimately returned to his house, which had caught fire. It means that too many problems in daily life cannot be addressed the students and their family.

For these reasons, the mother of McCourt's student named Paulie hopes her son to become "a plumber" in the future and "charge big money to make house calls, just like a doctor"(McCourt 50). Hence those words listed in the text book, in the mother's opinion, are not useful, because these words can only be used in the "fancy cocktail parties in Manhattan"(McCourt 50). They live in an era after the extended and tumultuous "years" marked by "depression

and war" (Remini258). The "communist" menace persisted (Remini 260). The "Soviet Union" relentlessly continued to quell "freedom" in "eastern Europe", quashing "rebellions" in "East Berlin" and "Hungary" (Remini 260). Following Eisenhower's recommendation, "Congress" boosted the "defense budget" to unprecedented levels, increasing it from approximately "$13 billion in 1950 to nearly $40 billion in 1960" (Remini 260). This surge was anticipated to strengthen the nation's preparedness against any "possible threat" to "its security" (Remini 260). Therefore, ordinary individuals of this time in America "preferred rest and quietude" (Remini258).

The focus of the students and their family is determined by their life's objective. J. V. Uexkull puts forward that animals' brains "project properties" onto the "world" around them rather than "passively receive visual information" (Berthoz 18). Accordingly, the world in their minds is made of "those aspects of the environment" that are significant for its "repertoire of possible actions"or "survival tools"bestowed upon "each animal" by "evolution" that serve to their individual objective or purpose (Berthoz 18-19). In the light of this fact, given that the goal of the students and their parents in *Teacher Man* is to lead a stable life after the war, the daily troubles that disrupt the stability of their life, such as the blocked toilet and the fire, always magnified to the students and their parents. These daily troubles serve as stimuli for the students' learning motivation.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on Fromm's psychological theory, this paper examines why students who are reluctant to any assignments become enthusiastic about the assignments of McCourt's course in *Teacher Man*. The analysis reveals that student's learning motivation is fundamentally rooted in their need to address real-world problems. Therefore, education should focus on enabling students to tackle real-world problems by applying what they have learned, which is a principle central to Outcome-Based Education (OBE). To achieve this goal, educators must first identify the specific challenges students face in real world before designing curriculum that addresses these needs. Through analyzing the fictitious excuse notes written by the students in *Teacher Man* and its social background, this paper uncovers the anxieties of the students living in McCourt's era under the shadow of war. The

anxiety makes the students and their family eager to maintain a stable life, and they are recultant to learn the knowledge taught by the school for which cannot help them lead a stable life. Nowadays, COVID-19 anxieties trouble students in the 21st century.*Teacher Man* offers a timeless lesson for the post-COVID-19 era: Education must meet students' current demand for addressing their fundamental need for stability while preparing them for an uncertain future.

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