"'Tis Hard to Dance with One Shoe": The Failure of the Fathers in Walker's *The Color Purple* and McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*.

Gwendolyn Nicole Hale  
*East Tennessee State University*

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.etsu.edu/etd

Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](https://dc.etsu.edu/etd)

**Recommended Citation**  

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.
“‘Tis Hard to Dance With One Shoe”:
The Failure of the Fathers in
Walker’s The Color Purple and
McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
East Tennessee State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

by
Gwendolyn Nicole Hale
May 2001

Dr. Fred Waage, Chair
Dr. Thomas Alan Holmes
Dr. Sonya Cashdan

Keywords: Walker, McCourt, African-American, Irish, Paternal Failures, Oppression
ABSTRACT

“‘Tis Hard to Dance With One Shoe”: The Failure of the Fathers in Walker’s The Color Purple and McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes.

by

Gwendolyn Nicole Hale

In his story, “The Commitments,” Roddy Doyle identifies the Irish as “the blacks of Europe” (148). This sentiment typifies the oppression of the two cultures. The overwhelmingly oppressive society of the two aforementioned groups creates an atmosphere of failure, particularly for the fathers, who, for the most part, are supposed to be the heads of their families. Through Alice Walker’s The Color Purple and Frank McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes, the reader discovers the effects of these failures of the fathers due to tyrannical societies that impose dominance over such groups as the African-Americans and the Irish. The main characters, Celie and Frank, are adversely affected by the absent or failing fathers, and must search for means to transcend the failure and oppression.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Mary S. Hale, and my brother, Anthony A. Hale, who have supported me in every way possible throughout my life. Through everything in my life, you have both filled my heart with love. There were times along the journey when I felt you were not walking with me. It is only in retrospect that I realize you both ran ahead to clear a path for me. Thank you Mom and Anthony, and in the words of Frank McCourt, “I learn from you, I admire you, and I love you.”
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Dr. Fred Waage, Dr. Alan Holmes, and Dr. Sonya Cashdan, for their patience and hard work. I could not have completed this thesis without their kindness and understanding.

I would like to thank my best friend, Cristina C. Vann, for all of her support, love, encouragement, and humor, which have all been required resources throughout this endeavor.

I would like to thank Francois Vincent for allowing me a glimpse into the lives of the Irish, as well as a guided historical tour of Ireland.

A special thanks is in order for Brad Owens who helped me make revisions.

I would also like to thank Nathan Gilbert for not only all of his computer assistance, but also for his friendship, support, laughter, and inspirational music.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my family and friends who have supported me throughout this endeavor, for without these people in my life, I could not “dance.”
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. FINDING FATHERS IN THE MIDST OF PATERNAL FAILURE</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “MY FATHER, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?”</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. REPAIRING THE DAMAGE OF THE FATHERS</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CONSULTED</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In the 1830s, African-Americans and Irish often lived side by side in the slums of American cities. They both took on the weight of doing America’s hard work while remaining poor. The Irish and African-Americans are often vilified and must suffer the oppression of a dominant culture. It appears that to be called an “Irishman” or a “mick” had come to be nearly as great an insult as to be called a “nigger.” However, the environmental and historical reasons rather than biological ones, give weight and emphasis to the comparison and grouping of the African-Americans and the Irish. The grouping of Irish and African-Americans seems odd until one takes into account emigration in the early 1900s. The first naturalization act passed in the first Congress in 1790 reserved the right of naturalization for “aliens being free white persons” (Cose 64). Clearly, this proved to be quite an obstacle for blacks. However, some people of European descent found problems in proving their “whiteness.” Apparently, those of European ethnicities struggling to prove their “whiteness” were considered “sub races.” There were hierarchies of “whiteness” in which emigrants found themselves struggling against (Cose 65). The Irish found difficulty in climbing the hierarchy, because they were not only contending with the stigma of being Irish, but also the stigma of being Catholic. Many “native” Americans placed a stigma on Irish emigrants as being like their poor relatives who could not take care of themselves. Neither the Irish nor the blacks could do enough to simply be white.
It is the shared hardships of these two cultures, as well as the camaraderie, that first led me to contemplate the intertwining tales of the African-Americans and the Irish. African-American and Irish literature is brimming with works that demonstrate examples of abusive and/or absent fathers. This similarity is striking yet not surprising since, as David Roediger points out, the two cultures parallel one another historically. In my studies of the two cultures and their literature, I cannot help but question why the absent and/or abusive father/male figure is such a dominant focus. Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* cement my belief that the African-American and the Irish stories seem to generate from the similar oppression and struggle suffered by the two cultures for hundreds of years. Also, both novels describe abject poverty as well as the grim and base actions that accompany poverty in the face of an oppressive culture. The oppressive culture is represented by British rule in Ireland and the oppressive white patriarchy in American culture. Both oppressive cultures are relevant to Celie’s and Frank’s lives which are microcosms of the disillusionment and loneliness that accompany the societal and economic constraints of pervasive oppression.

In my effort to fully comprehend and truthfully convey the hardships of the two cultures represented in *The Color Purple* and *Angela’s Ashes*, I intend to employ the works and criticisms of such authors as the aforementioned David Roediger. I also intend to use Howard Zinn’s *The People’s History of the United States* which offers great insight into the lives of immigrants and slaves in the early years of the country. In my research, I have found that many critics approach their own attempts to understand the male characters in Walker’s novel by focusing on the female characters and their relationships with the male characters in their lives. Walker bases her description of black
women on what Mary Helen Washington, in a *Black World* review, refers to as her “unique vision and philosophy of the Black woman.” According to Barbara A. Bannon of *Publishers Weekly*, this philosophy stems from the “theme of the poor black man’s oppression of his family and the unconscious reasons for it” (Royster 4). I hope to shed light on these “unconscious reasons” in my thesis. Walker, in her interview with the same magazine, asserts: “The cruelty of the black man to his wife and family is one of the greatest American tragedies. It has mutilated the spirit and body of the black family and of most black mothers.” In my thesis, I will explore not only the cruelty of these men but why they continue to stifle their own people with violence and personal shortcomings.

In reading reviews of *Angela’s Ashes*, several critics conclude that McCourt rightfully places the blame for his family’s poverty upon his father’s drunken shoulders. Some critics also marvel at McCourt’s childhood of poverty, illness, alcoholism, and struggle, and how there is little resentment found within the novel. Most of the criticism and reviews that I have encountered praise McCourt’s humanity and fortitude.

In the articles and reviews written about these novels, as well as the struggles and hardships of the two cultures represented, I found that no one denies the legacies of suffering of the Irish and African-Americans. However, I find it unusual that the oppressive societies of these two novels are only hinted at. Critics seem to consider the poverty and oppression brought on by the pervasive culture as peripheral to the stories and circumstances of Celie and Frank rather than the thrust of many of the troubles that plague the two characters, particularly the failure of the male figures in the two characters’ lives. By exploring the lives of Celie and Frank, I hope to gain a better
understanding of why the men in these two novels, as well as in these two cultures, continually fail their families in the face of oppression and personal falterings.

The legacies of the suffering Irish and the African-Americans found in Angela’s Ashes and in The Color Purple cannot be denied. The fathers and men in these two novels fall short of being effective heads of a family or members of a relationship. Such failure is omnipresent throughout both novels. However, it is unusual that the oppressive societies and institutions in these two novels exist only implicitly. Critics and readers alike seem to consider the poverty and oppression brought on by such a pervasive culture as peripheral to the stories and circumstances of Celie and Frank rather than the thrust of many of the troubles that plague the two characters. By exploring the lives of Celie and Frank, one can gain a better understanding of why the men in these two novels, as well as these two cultures, continually fail their families in the face of oppression and personal challenges.

Through an epistolary fictional account of her life, Celie, in The Color Purple, writes her account of the ongoing oppression in her life. This oppression begins, unknown to Celie at first, when her mother marries her stepfather, Mr. ______. Because Celie’s biological father dies when Celie is quite young, she has no recollection of his alleged kindness. Because of the premature death of her father, Celie never knows a compassionate, supportive man. According to Celie, her oppression begins around the age of fourteen. Weak from giving birth and having to take care of her children and her husband, Celie’s mother refuses to participate in sex with Mr. ______. He then turns his sexual appetite toward the sexually maturing Celie who still believes Mr. ______ is her biological father. Celie soon finds herself pregnant by Mr. ______. Tragically, Celie is
too young and naïve to be able to recognize what is happening to her. Also, Celie’s mother dies so there is no one Celie can talk to about her situation and the abuse that she suffers. After Celie gives birth, Mr. ______ takes the child away for Celie to never see again. This happens a second time and again, Celie does not know where her children are taken.

Celie becomes a domestic slave for Mr. ______ and the other children. He takes Celie out of school when she becomes pregnant because he deems her too stupid to attend. The reader also gains a sense that Mr. ______ is embarrassed of the implications of Celie’s pregnancy. Throughout this time, Celie serves as a servant in the church where she does most of the menial, back breaking work. The other congregates look down upon Celie as lowly and immoral because she is pregnant and unwed. Celie strives to find meaning in all that she devotes herself to spiritually, but cannot because all that happens to her has been preached as God’s will.

The day comes for Celie to get married. In a scene reminiscent of a slave auction, Celie is passed from one domineering man to another. Albert, her new husband, treats Celie in the same manner as Mr. ______ did when she was living with him. Not only does Albert belittle Celie emotionally and physically, but Celie is also expected to take care of all his unruly children while cooking, cleaning, and gardening. After a hard day’s work, Celie must then satisfy Albert’s sexual desires even though Celie is unwilling and uninterested.

Through her marriage to Albert, Celie’s life becomes connected to others who must struggle against oppressive men. Harpo, Albert’s son, feels he must beat his wife, Sofia, simply because she is his wife and that is all he has ever known his father to do.
This theme of the paternal legacy of abuse and oppression is found throughout the novel. Albert’s father strongly suggests that Albert not marry Shug Avery for her conduct is questionable. Therefore, Albert does the same to Harpo when he wishes to marry Sofia.

The overwhelming themes of anger, abuse, and oppression seem to fade over the span of the novel as the characters begin to age. Harpo eventually learns that he cannot control Sofia, so he stops his physical assaults upon her. However, Sofia also learns that she must act a certain way so as not to draw unwelcome attention of white society. Mr. ______ never gains any type of understanding and therefore dies unredeemed. Once he is deserted by Celie and Shug, Albert begins to reexamine his values, and through sewing and other domestic activities, he finds peace within himself and with Celie. Albert and Celie eventually become friends once Albert learns that he must earn respect rather than aggressively taking it. Finally, after years of abuse and servitude, Celie eventually breaks free of the oppression of the church, which has colored her perception of and reactions to men throughout her life.

Celia reexamines her oppression at the hands of the church later on in the novel when she meets her love interest, Shug Avery. Shug reveals to Celie that God does not have to be thought of as a domineering man. Religion is supposed to be a spiritually freeing and unifying experience, as opposed to an oppressive means of maintaining control. Celie learns that she does not have to think of God as a man or a woman but rather an It. Celie realizes that the beauty of religion and God’s teachings are still relevant, but it is man and society who have tainted the doctrines and tenets of the church. This distortion of the teachings is used by society to gain and maintain a hierarchy of
power. When Celie realizes this, she is empowered and she is no longer confined to the lower rungs of the power structure.

Through his memoir, *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt, recounts the stories of his childhood as well as the oppression that engulfs such a childhood in Ireland. The oppression in Frank’s life begins when his mother and father marry after meeting in New York. Finding times desperate during the Great Depression, the couple, along with their children, must move back to Ireland in the hopes of eking out a better existence. Finding the effects of the Great Depression worldwide, the McCourts find themselves in a desperate situation once again.

Although the mother, Angela, is a silent accomplice in the father’s failures, Malachy Sr. must bear most of the blame for the family’s poor living conditions. He constantly loses his jobs and usually drinks up the money that is needed to provide relief for the family. Malachy is far removed from any relatives and finds no one to cling to in Limerick for those outside of the North eye Malachy suspiciously as a Protestant. As a displaced man in many regards, Malachy Sr. fails his family by not providing them with the basic necessities of life. Angela must rely on charitable organizations and handouts for mere survival.

Growing up in an environment where the father defines manhood in a distorted manner and the mother rarely protests the father’s shortcomings and decisions, Frank must search for a more effective definition of manhood. This search comes about once Frank realizes the inadequacies of his father and the effects that they have on the family. Unfortunately, no single person has the ability to embody or define manhood for Frank, as it seems all the men in Limerick fall short of being effective men to some degree.
Therefore, Frank must define manhood by compiling valuable, noble characteristics of different men.

Frank eventually frees himself of the oppression and failure of his father and the other men in his life by viewing God and religion in a different way than that which has been taught to Frank all of his life. Frank learns to see the church’s limitations. By growing up in a religion that demands unquestioned devotion, a society that encourages and allows complacency, and a family that perverts religious teachings and social and domestic responsibility, Frank finally understands the responsibility he has to himself: He must leave such a situation before he conforms to the legacies of oppression and failure that so many of the men and institutions in his life embody.

In the unaltered nature of things, Frank will become the alcoholic oppressor and Celie will marry a man like Frank, for she is taught how to be victimized at an early age. However, the masculine influences and oppressive society draw these two novels into a parallel. Both Celie and Frank are affected by an overwhelming oppressive culture that demands acquiescence. For Frank and other Irish Catholics, British colonization plays a large role in dictating status and mobility. For Celie and other blacks, white American society demands certain behaviors and characteristics in order to be allowed on a low rung of the social hierarchy. In fact, the Irish and the African-Americans find that opposites are demanded of them. The two must be submissive to the demands of the dominant culture. However, the Irish and the African-Americans must also work against this oppressive society to better their own lives as well as their family’s life. Therefore, Frank and Celie find themselves walking a precarious line between servitude to a
dominant society and revolt against that society that possesses the say in the oppressed people’s social and economic mobility.

The narrative styles of Angela’s Ashes and The Color Purple make for interesting comparisons. First of all, both authors make use of the innocent eye perspective. McCourt recounts his childhood through the language and standpoint of his youth. Celie, although approximately fourteen when the novel begins, is an arrested child through years of abuse and misleading education. While memoir and epistolary fiction differ, the innocent eye perspective of Celie and Frank compensates for the difference in narrative style. However, one must consider that these narrators, particularly McCourt, are relying on memory and these narratives may be unreliable because, as adults and victims, the narrators can choose what they wish to remember and include in their stories.

Having addressed oppression, style, and reliability, one must also consider the destruction of character found in both novels. Both Frank and Celie begin the novels as outsiders looking into a society that requires certain criteria of people to be allowed “inside.” This destruction of character is found to occur to many of the characters within both novels, since both deal with an oppressed group of people. However, Celie and Frank experience this destructive force for several different reasons. Celie is a lesbian. This is not her defining characteristic, yet her sexual preference plays an important role. By connecting with women, particularly Shug Avery, Celie finds her sexual oppression by the men in her life much more difficult to endure. This sexual preference makes Celie an outsider among outsiders. Also, her patriarchal religion does not welcome such deviations from the standard definition of intimate relationships. Therefore, Celie finds that her true character is suppressed by such imposed standards. Most of the characters in
The Color Purple do not know of Celie’s sexual preference. This alone says volumes about what Celie feels she can freely convey about herself. Frank McCourt suffers character destruction in several ways. The primary destructive force in his life, however, is class distinction. The British, through colonization, have forced much of Ireland into poverty. Making the McCourt’s situation dire is the alcoholic father who cannot hold down a job. Making a bad situation worse is the fact that Frank’s father is from the North. By being from the North, everyone in Limerick assumes he is Protestant. Frank applies for the position of an altar boy and is rejected after the priest takes a look at Frank and tells him they have no room for him. Frank also suffers class distinction when others tell him that he has that odd way about him much like his father from the North. Frank also encounters such differentiation when he first arrives in Ireland as a child and everyone, upon hearing him speak, call him a “little yankee.” Frank cannot escape those peculiarities he inherits from his father nor can he improve the conditions of his family until he is old enough to work. Frank finds an inescapable stigma placed upon him that shadows all that he does.

Both Celie and Frank eventually find that their subjugation comes from patriarchal values and institutions. The man is supposed to be an authority figure and a provider, yet most of the men in these novels never accomplish either. The only characteristic the men ever achieve is power through intimidation. The churches and religions in both novels are intended to be peaceful and unifying forces in the lives of the congregates, yet somehow the intent of the religion and spirituality get distorted into tyrannical tools. Frank’s father employs the church to hide his own shortcomings, while Mr. ______ uses the church and God to wield power. Therefore, escape comes to both
Celie and Frank when they redefine manhood and rediscover God and religion in a way that is outside the previous teachings of their churches and fathers.
CHAPTER 2
FINDING FATHERS IN THE MIDST OF PATERNAL FAILURE

The African-American and Irish experiences at the turn of the twentieth century make for an unlikely comparison. The Color Purple and Angela’s Ashes transcend cultural boundaries to encapsulate human fortitude in the face of extreme circumstances. The stories make similar commentaries on the effects of overwhelming oppressive societies as well as the aftermath of violence and abuse and their direct correlation with the oppression. Sadly, the shared violence and shortcomings of the fathers and the silent collaborations of the mothers join the two works in an historical context.

In order to examine the connectedness of these two disparate works, one must consider the definitions and perceived definitions of manhood and fatherhood in the two novels. Frank McCourt initially defines manhood through superficial, ineffective characteristics that his own father demonstrates. Alcohol, being a key ingredient of masculinity, helps to define McCourt’s idea of manhood. Therefore, as a “man,” Malachy Sr. must lose his jobs regularly by not showing up to work because of a drunken binge the night before. As a “man,” Malachy Sr. waits in line at the Labour Exchange to collect money for serving in the I.R.A.. However, bringing this money home to feed and provide for his family is optional. Malachy Sr. usually chooses to use the money for alcohol at the local pub.

While getting money from the Labour Exchange is acceptable, taking handouts is not. Malachy Sr. refuses to ask for a few potatoes from a farmer he is working for. These potatoes will help feed his hungry family, yet Malachy Sr. considers this weak and
degrading. To be a man requires an incredible amount of outward appearance, which Malachy Sr. refers to as “dignity” (McCourt 118). To maintain this dignity, Malachy maintains that men must wear collars and ties to be considered gentlemen. Also, to be considered respectable, a man must not be seen carrying ordinary things such as the pig’s head that Frank must carry through the streets of Limerick in order to feed his family on Christmas day. To be considered a man, one must drink pints of stout. Only while drinking the pints are men allowed to cry. After a night of drinking, Malachy Sr. comes home smelling of alcohol. Upon arriving home, he wakes his children from their slumber, lines them up, and questions their loyalty to Ireland. Malachy Sr. does this only after waking up the neighbors by singing Roddy McCorley and Kevin Barry songs. The men in McCourt’s world engage in sex even if it means begetting children they are unable to care for. Still, McCourt’s “man” is religious. This spirituality of McCourt’s character is only a superficial veil employed to conceal weaknesses and shortcomings. Frank also understands manhood as neglecting one’s family and never taking an interest in the direction of his children’s lives. Finally, in this warped definition of manhood, the men blame others for their shortcomings, give false hope, and eventually leave.

Living in the midst of such distorted examples of manhood and fatherhood, Frank still manages to compile a makeshift definition of effective men. These effective men educate, empower, and support themselves and their families. Men like Mr. O’Halloran teach charity, responsibility, and humility. Other men in Frank’s life exemplify a balanced life, which includes hard work and motivation. Frank eventually learns that men are allowed to cry without the tears being invoked by the pint. Finally, Frank learns that a man must constantly question long-held beliefs as well as the intentions of
institutions. As Frank works to harvest the characteristics one must possess to be an effective man, he realizes that most of these characteristics are in direct contradiction to those attributes Malachy Sr. demonstrates.

Similarly, the characters in *The Color Purple* define manhood and fatherhood through the cruel and ineffective characteristics that the men demonstrate throughout most of the novel. Celie, along with the other characters in the novel whose lives have been infected by the abusive ways of the black men, can define manhood only by what she has witnessed and experienced. First, Celie finds the definition of manhood to entail anger and cruelty. She experiences this throughout her life through her stepfather and her husband. Celie also defines manhood through sexual violence, for the men in her life have always invoked fear and physical harm when engaging in sex with her. This intimidation demonstrates the male need for power and authority, which in this work, defines manhood. Harpo, Albert’s son, learns this definition from his father, who feels women must obey men, and, to keep the women in a submissive role, the men must beat their women. Therefore, to be a man, one must humiliate others in order to glean power.

In this quest for power, the men in *The Color Purple* assume the role of slave master at times. This is evident when Celie is passed from her stepfather to Albert who wishes to marry her. In contrast to this need for power, the reader also finds many of the males in the novel to be powerless and weak. Instances of this weakness abound throughout the novel. Albert, who normally intimidates Celie, finds himself powerless when dealing with Shug Avery. Also, Harpo and Albert both illustrate their lack of control as they attempt to gain the approval of their fathers. Their desire to marry Sofia and Shug, respectively, is hampered by their emasculation at the hands of their fathers.
Not unlike the men in *Angela’s Ashes*, the men in Walker’s novel find themselves powerless in some aspects of their lives. In order to compensate for these weaknesses and frustrations, the men such as Mr. ______ and Albert use superficial tactics such as fear and intimidation to conceal their powerlessness.

Nonetheless, through these distorted views of manhood and fatherhood, the characters of the novel somehow manage to redefine manhood in a more effective way. Surprisingly, Shug Avery makes the first move in expanding the definition of manhood to include positive traits such as love and equality. Because Shug assumes a masculine role in their relationship, Celie constructs a makeshift definition of effective manhood through Shug’s actions, just as Frank does in *Angela’s Ashes*. While the characters in Walker’s novel do not explicitly define manhood as McCourt does in his novel, the reader finds the characters struggling to define masculinity nonetheless. The male characters, in their quest to become men, succeed only when they extend the boundaries of society’s definition of manhood.

Albert becomes more of a man when he takes on the duties that he has previously assigned to women. Albert has a gift for child care, which he demonstrates when he cooks for the sick little girl with sickle cell anemia. Also, Albert takes up sewing, which he has a natural gift for. He also finds himself to be a good housekeeper. By the novel’s end, Albert learns to earn respect rather than taking power through intimidation and abuse. Harpo also expands his definition of manhood when he takes on the duties he has normally assigned to women. Sofia goes to work in Celie’s store while Harpo stays at home with the children. The reader finds that the men become more effective and humane when they go beyond the notions of manhood as prescribed by their fathers.
Frank McCourt begins weaving his memoir with somber foreshadowing of the failure of his own father and so many other men in Limerick, Ireland when he speaks of the miserable conditions of the city by stating, "In pubs, steam rose from damp bodies and garments to be inhaled with cigarette and pipe smoke laced with the odor of piss wafting in from the outdoor jakes where many a man puked up his week's wages" (McCourt 10). Malachy McCourt Sr. is trapped in his hopelessness and, therefore, feels no regret for drinking away the earnings and dole that are to support his family. With Malachy Sr. as a father figure, Frank McCourt, throughout Angela's Ashes, swims in hopelessness as he attempts to grow up. Frank's siblings keep dying, his father sinks deeper into his alcoholism, and all of Frank's questions about maturation and manhood remain unanswered. Frank searches through the murky memories of his childhood in Limerick contending with what it means to be a man.

Frank makes it apparent from the beginning of Angela's Ashes that his father does not embody that which is entailed in being a "good" father. Malachy Sr. can never answer young Frank's questions about adulthood and what it means to be a man, for Malachy Sr. does not fully comprehend manhood himself. However, the reader becomes conscious of Frank's awareness that there is "something" that defines a man when he is at his brother's [Oliver’s] funeral. Frank ruminates, "Oliver is dead and I hate jackdaws. I'd be a man someday and I'd come back with a bag of rocks and I'd leave the graveyard littered with dead jackdaws" (76). There, in the graveyard with his father smelling of alcohol from excessive drinking, Frank stands with a rock in his hand accompanied by anger and sorrow. He begins to gain a small understanding that his father is faltering to some degree, but inexperience and lack of models prevent him from pinpointing his
feelings of sorrow and anger. Malachy Sr. does not take time to equip Frank with emotional support to deal with the grief caused by Oliver's death. Therefore, he fails in his role as a father.

Oliver’s death, which could have been prevented with proper medical care and nutrition, highlights Malachy Sr.’s shortcomings. On the day of Oliver's funeral, Malachy Sr. goes out drinking with Pa Keating while his children are at home cold and hungry. Before Frank curses the jackdaws around Oliver's grave, he begins to notice the adults' reactions to Oliver's death: "My mother and Aunt Aggie cried, Grandma looked angry, Dad, Uncle Pa Keating, and Uncle Pat Sheehan looked sad but did not cry and I thought that if you're a man you can cry only when you have the black stuff that is called the pint" (92). However, the reader begins to see a pattern in Malachy Sr.'s reaction to his children's deaths. His daughter, Margaret, dies. Again, he goes out drinking. He even donates Margaret's body to science to get money to contribute to his alcoholic cravings.

Soon after Oliver's death, his twin brother Eugene dies. Once again, the father stumbles and falls during the time his family needs him most. After Eugene's wake, the father illustrates the magnitude of his alcoholism by going around and draining all the stout bottles left behind by those in attendance. Frank witnesses his father's pathetic dependence as Malachy Sr. runs his finger inside a whisky bottle in a desperate attempt to gain one more drop of the alcohol (102). Then, on the day of Eugene's funeral, Malachy Sr. takes Frank into town with him to collect money at the Labour Exchange. Soon, Malachy Sr. is off to the pub for a pint of stout. Frank takes the pennies the men give him at the Labour Exchange and follows his father's example. He engages in instant gratification by buying and eating toffee from the candy shop at an inappropriate time.
Aunt Aggie finds Frank eating toffee and sends Frank into the pub to retrieve his father. Sitting in the pub with a stranger, Malachy Sr. fails Frank once again as he carelessly sits his pint on top of Eugene’s coffin. Here, Frank gains a frightened understanding into his father’s shortcomings as well as his own in the wake of Eugene’s death: “I want to cry when I see the black pints on top of it [Eugene’s coffin]. I’m sorry now I ever ate that toffee and I wish I could take it out of my stomach and give it back to the woman in the shop because it’s not right to be eating toffee when Eugene is dead in the bed and I’m frightened by the two pints on the white coffin” (105). This episode ends with Frank’s innocent, adolescent prayer. He prays that all of his dead siblings are in heaven warm and well fed. Frank also prays that they are in a nice place where “all the fathers bring home the money from the Labour Exchange and you don’t have to be running around to pubs to find them” (110). In this moment, Frank realizes his father has let down his siblings in a profoundly tragic way.

With the death of his siblings, Frank sees more clearly his father’s deficiencies. However, what he does not initially realize is that the lapses he witnesses in his father are not the first instances of neglect and failure on his father’s part. His mother, Angela, is no stranger to absent men, which may explain her tolerance for Malachy Sr.’s failings. Frank eventually learns that his grandfather, Angela’s father, left for Australia weeks before she was to be born. Also, Angela’s father came home after a night of drinking and dropped Angela’s older brother, Pat, on his head, causing permanent damage. On the day of Frank’s christening, Malachy Sr. is found at a speakeasy in search of alcohol. This seems strong foreshadowing of the life Frank is fated to live.

23
Not only does Malachy Sr. fail to provide for his sons and his wife financially and emotionally, but he also instills in his sons a false sense of pride. The outward trappings of respect that Malachy Sr. exhibits seem insignificant at first, yet it is only when the ugliness of his father’s deficiencies seep from behind these masks of respect that Frank begins to feel betrayed by such conciliatory measures. One of the first examples of such vain cloaks of manhood is when Malachy Sr. refuses to leave the house without a collar and tie. Malachy Sr. presents self-respect to his children as an ornament to be exhibited to others rather than a philosophy to be internalized. Malachy Sr. states, “A man without a collar and tie is a man with no respect for himself” (115). The father makes no mention of accepting one’s mistakes and learning from them. He never utters a word about independence and providing for loved ones as a facet of self-respect. Instead, he presents respect as a mere piece of cloth to be tied around the neck.

The father finds work in the country, and Angela hopes he will compensate the family for his drinking by bringing home a few potatoes. Malachy Sr., with his idea of gentility, states that he will never stoop so low as to ask a farmer for a handout. Angela wonders how it is different for her to wait outside the St. Vincent DePaul Society waiting for handouts to feed and clothe her family. Malachy Sr. replies, “You have to keep the dignity” (118). Malachy Sr. instructs his children that a man loses his dignity when he carries ordinary things. The father sits at home while his pregnant wife and two sons go out begging for Christmas dinner. Frank carries the pig’s head for his mother because she is simply too tired and gasping for air. Malachy Sr. tells the two boys that, “When you grow up you have to wear a collar and tie and never let people see you carry things” (120). He then proceeds to reprimand his wife by saying, “It’s a disgraceful thing to let a
boy carry an object like that through the street of Limerick” (120). After this lesson in respectful appearances, Frank is sent to his grandmother’s to borrow a pot in which to boil the pig’s head. Gaining a glimpse into the dire conditions Angela and her grandsons are living in, Frank’s grandmother poses a grave question to Frank about his father: “What kind of man is he at all, at all?” (121). Frank's lack of experience and insight into what it means to be a man leaves him unable to answer silently his grandmother's rhetorical question.

Gaining even more insight into his father’s faults, Frank must travel down to Dock Road to search for any coal or turf left behind from the lorries. Even in Frank’s pre-adolescent mind, he understands the magnitude of his family’s poverty and isolation. He mentions that he and little Malachy will most certainly find coal left on the road simply because the poorest of the poor do not scavenge for coal on Christmas day. Frank accumulates and stores these memories of his father’s grand airs and failures. However, on Christmas day, Frank must serve the family where his father has failed: “There’s no use asking Dad to go because he will never stoop that low and even if he did he won’t carry things through the streets” (121). Just moments before, Malachy Sr. has told the family how disgraceful such acts of carrying ordinary things are. Realizing that his father has perverted the idea of manhood, Frank silently assumes responsibility for his family.

As Frank gains years, he takes on more responsibility for his siblings, yet his youthful heart and hands seem to betray him as he creates bigger problems than the ones he attempts to correct. In his youth, Frank looks up to his father, for his father can tell stories of Cachulain and, on rare occasions, bring home the “Friday Penny.” Frank’s father implicitly teaches him that men do not beg, and fathers go to the pubs to drink their
pints. Fatherhood seems simple and benevolent until Frank notices his mother’s sobs. Angela has given birth to six children, three of whom are dead. Malachy Sr. will not keep a job for any length of time and cannot provide for the family, yet he demands Angela engage in sexual intercourse with him. Angela finally refuses; she has neither the physical energy nor the monetary resources to bring another child into the world. Malachy Sr. retaliates by warning Angela that she will be going against that which God deems right if she refuses to fulfill her “wifely duties.”

Angela’s strength has been waning under the weight of her husband’s failures. It is in this struggle with her husband that Angela finds her breaking point. She realizes that no circle of hell could be any worse than the life she is living. Therefore, there is no substantial reason for her to engage in sex with her husband, for misery seems inevitable either way. She will either bear more unwanted children who will most likely starve, or she will die leaving the surviving children with a neglectful father. Frank notices his mother’s tears when her children die. He notices the tears when the father comes home drunk and penniless. Finally, Frank notices his mother’s tears when she and Mr. Clohessy reminisce about their days of dancing. In that moment, Frank reaches a quiet understanding of what his father has done, for Frank realizes his mother once had a life before meeting Malachy Sr. The reminiscence of dancing represents freedom, happiness, and youthful exuberance. Frank recognizes that his father has taken Angela’s freedom, destroyed her happiness, and wasted her youthful exuberance. Now, through her inability to retaliate against her husband’s alcoholic ways, Angela lives merely to survive.

Malachy Sr. uses the church as a stand-in father while he frequents the pubs: “Dad makes us say grace before meals and after meals and he tells us to be good boys at
school because God is watching every move and the slightest disobedience will send us straight to hell where we’ll never have to worry about the cold again” (117). Malachy Sr.’s emotional absenteeism creates a psychological dependence on religion within Frank. This religion comes to embody fatherhood for him. God watches over him and provides structure. However, it is the same religion that Malachy Sr. employs as a surrogate father that denies Frank the opportunity to be an altar boy simply because of his appearance and his family’s financial status. Frank views this refusal of opportunity as a paternal betrayal. His surrogate father has forsaken him just as surely as his biological father. Malachy Sr. accepts this judgment on his son like all the other “injustices” that occur; he accepts them and never fights for himself or his family.

Malachy Sr. gives his family little except for the devastating gift of false hope. At first, the family becomes excited and hopeful when Malachy Sr. acquires a job. Frank and his siblings make plans about how to spend their Saturday night while their mother constructs a mental list of the necessities that she will buy at the store. She also gains enough hope in her husband to go to the store and ask for credit for food. After Malachy Sr. falls into the cycle of getting a job and losing it a few weeks later because of his drinking, the family finds itself losing all hope in Malachy Sr. altogether.

His father shares the morning news with Frank, yet Malachy Sr. always condemns and blames the English for all the trouble that occurs to him and his family. While Malachy Sr. believes Frank can do anything he sets his mind to, he quells any hope or belief Frank may have in himself, by not equipping Frank with emotional support or the basic necessities that he needs to succeed (261). Another example of this false hope occurs when Malachy Sr. sends his family three pounds from England. The family, in
desperation, somehow believes that the father will be different this time and that he will send home his wages before he drinks them all. Of course Malachy Sr. does not change, and Frank and little Malachy are forced to relinquish their remaining values. The absent father requires that the boys quickly become men. The inability of these children to fulfill the role of fathers quickly results in behavior such as stealing, which further widens the gap between the reality of their circumstances and what polite civilization demands. Civilization dictates that men must provide for their family and be morally aware. The reality of the situation is such that the children must choose one or the other. Malachy Sr., because he is absent, creates a situation in which Frank will encounter his own first failure.

Malachy Sr. reappears in his family’s life a few more times, each visit shorter and more emotionally distant than the last. With his father virtually absent from his life, Frank begins to find male role models and father figures in others, thus making a patchwork definition of a father, because the most important man in his adolescent life does not embody such a definition. One such important figure in Frank’s life is the schoolmaster, Mr. O’Halloran. O’Halloran informs the students that the Irish committed atrocities during wars. This negates Frank’s father’s finger pointing at the English for his failures. Mr. O’Halloran also empowers his students by saying, “You might be poor, your shoes might be broken, but your mind is a palace” (259). Again, O’Halloran goes a step beyond Malachy McCourt: not only does he believe in the boys, he also provides them with the education and support they need to succeed. Also, the schoolmaster seems to be the one person who is concerned about the boys’ shoes for winter. Mr. O’Halloran has his students go around Limerick selling raffle tickets. Together, they raise enough
money to buy shoes for the eleven boys in the classroom without shoes. Here, O’Halloran teaches the children charity but couples it with individual responsibility.

Uncle Pa Keating also contributes to the patchwork of Frank’s idea of a father. He takes Frank and little Malachy into South’s Pub on Christmas Day and gets them lemonade after they have been out looking for coal to boil the pig’s head with. Pa makes sure the boys get enough coal. Also, Pa Keating is always willing to take Frank and his brothers into his house, even if Aunt Aggie is not. Pa answers Frank’s questions about the world while providing him with food and warmth. Pa Keating also demonstrates balance. He goes to work, stops by the pub on the way home for a pint or two, and then comes home with his wages. This is a stark contrast to Frank’s father’s attitude of excess.

Another contributor to Frank’s idea of fatherhood is Seamus, the custodian at the hospital Frank is staying at when he is diagnosed with typhoid and then conjunctivitis. Seamus is also a pure, hard-working man who admits his shortcomings but is constantly striving to improve himself. He allows Frank to teach him things and they learn together. Seamus is a stark contrast to Malachy McCourt. Seamus admits his ignorance about certain aspects of the world and works to educate himself. Seamus also exemplifies a nobility unknown to Malachy McCourt. Seamus intends to go to England and work in a factory for a couple of months and then send the money to bring his wife over with him. However, Seamus is not content with mere wages. He hopes to learn to read and write so perhaps when he and his wife have children of their own, the children will not have a “fool for a father” (287).

Mr. Hannon also helps Frank realize a small portion of the definition of manhood. Frank begins working for Mr. Hannon after school to earn money to help support his
family. First, Mr. Hannon compliments Frank on the work he does, thus bolstering Frank’s self-esteem. Mr. Hannon also helps boost Frank above the name calling and pettiness of the boys at Leamy’s school by simply allowing Frank to take the control of the horses as the two trot away from Leamy’s school and the on looking boys. Mrs. Hannon tells Frank that Mr. Hannon thinks of him as a son. Here, Frank catches a glimpse of the reciprocating relationship of a father and a son.

Angela does attempt to help Frank realize his manhood and the decency that such maturity should entail. Although she is filled with heartbreak and anguish, Angela puts forth moderate effort in instilling values in Frank, for Malachy Sr. is simply not fit to take on such a task. Such teachings on the part of Angela are exemplified in the instance in which Frank must quit his job delivering coal because of his eyes. Frank cries, “I want the job. I want to bring home the shilling. I want to be a man.” Angela replies, “You can be a man without bringing home a shilling” (328). Still, Angela makes no effort to compensate for the lost money that Frank would have been bringing home. She does not attempt to secure a job cooking, cleaning, or sewing for a family who could pay her for her work. Such a lack of proactive measures on Angela’s part does little to help Frank believe his mother’s mutterings that everything will work out for the best. Angela fails Frank in that she plays a silent accomplice to her husband’s misbehaviors. Although she provides many hollow threats, at no point does Angela stand up to her husband for the sake of her children.

When Frank must quit the job with Mr. Hannon he says, “And I can’t stop crying now because this was my one chance to be a man and bring home the money that the telegram boy never brought from my father” (333). Frank also cries when he finds that
Mr. Hannon thought of him as a son. When, at the age of fourteen, Frank gets the job as a telegram boy, Aunt Aggie realizes that Frank is attempting to gather his shattered expectations of his father and do something meaningful. However, Aunt Aggie also realizes that Frank is too poor to buy decent clothes, which are required for his new job. In her own cold and angry way, Aunt Aggie buys Frank new clothes. This small but meaningful gesture is much more than Frank's own parents offer. As Frank carries the package of new clothes home, he must turn toward the river Shannon “so the whole world won’t see the tears of a man the day he’s fourteen” (392). This is the first time Frank calls himself a man when he cries.

There is an alarming moment when it appears that Frank has adopted the drunken ways of his father who constantly lets him down. First, Uncle Pa Keating assumes the role of father when he buys Frank his first pint on Frank's sixteenth birthday. Frank stumbles home drunk and Angela comments on his state by saying, “Just like your father” (431). Here, Frank is not only dealing with his intoxicated state, but he is also discovering how to deal with the far reaching effects his father’s shortcomings have had on his life and his family’s life. Frank retaliates against his mother having compared him to his father by reminding Angela that he knows of her sexual activity with her cousin Laman. The reader suspects Angela's sexual activity with her cousin is a means of "paying" Laman for a place to stay because she has no money. Angela’s own idea of self-worth is challenged by Frank’s condemnation of her actions. Frank, in a sense, is forcing Angela to face the same reality that he has been thrust into. Having been forced into such a reality where Angela dare not tread, Frank attempts to find solace in religion.
Frank begins to believe that his prayers to St. Francis are not being heard and he questions all the evil and injustice in the world. “Why didn’t you heal Theresa? Why did you let her go to hell? You let my mother climb to the loft. You let me get into a state of doom. Little children’s shoes scattered in concentration camps. I have the abscess again. It’s in my chest and I’m hungry” (433). Frank, on his knees in a church, howls with the memory of his confusion, anger, and sadness. God the Father seems to fail like the other men in the novel. Like his own father, God seems to have created life and then left his children to their own devices. This hands-off approach to fatherhood makes Frank feel alone.

Father Gregory intervenes, assuming the paternal role that Frank’s father shed. Here, in this Franciscan church, Frank is allowed to unburden his soul without being ridiculed or condemned. Father Gregory allows Frank to see beyond the confines of his past by telling Frank that God forgives and loves him, but Frank must also forgive and love himself. This seems to be in direct contradiction to the belittlement Frank has received from his faith for the bigger part of his life. Here, Father Gregory empowers Frank and bestows worth upon him. Father Gregory does not solve Frank’s problems but provides him with the courage and solace to face the impediments with a mature outlook.

It is only after Frank approaches religion on his own terms and not under the strict supervision of priests, a drunken father, and loathsome schoolmasters, does he find peace and solace in the religion that has shaped his life up until the age of sixteen. Like Celie, it is only after Frank ceases to view religion in the strict terms set forth by his father, does he begin to understand God and the purpose of religion. It is this very religion that tolerates complacency in Malachy Sr. and offers forgiveness to all those who drink away
their earnings, neglect their children, and leave their families in poverty. Again, much like Celie, Frank realizes that God has not forsaken him, but rather the men in his life have distorted the tenets and purpose of religion to conceal their shortcomings.

Frank McCourt experiences a great deal of grief and loss to arrive at the notion of what it means to be a man. Frank invents the ideal father by borrowing admirable characteristics from men outside his family. Frank realizes he must transform his sorrow-filled past and the memories of a failed father into a goal to work toward. As he matures, Frank begins to understand the complexities of being a man. On his way to New York, Frank engages in sex with a woman he meets. He is exhilarated by the moment, yet there is an air of disappointment. Testosterone and the ability to have sex are the easy aspects of being a man. The struggle comes when a man must balance his decisions, his urges, and his responsibilities.

In comparison with McCourt’s memoir, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* presents the struggle for survival of a people of a different cultural background. Walker continually comments on the state of African-Americans in relation to the world in which they must dwell. Walker’s characters illustrate a cross-section of black culture that demonstrates the double standard America has set forth for its minorities, as well as the socioeconomic and emotional turmoil that such a struggle entails. Through Celie, Nettie, and their relationships with others, the reader gets a clear sense of the feelings of frustration and anger that African-Americans, particularly the males, experience. The reader also witnesses the irrational expressions of rage that come to the fore when society fails to equip its own with support structures and outlets such as education and job skills, leaving only a wake of frustration and rejection.
Alice Walker illustrates the tragic rift in the lives of African-Americans who are trying to attain some level of success in a predominately white-owned society. This inequality is exemplified in the story Nettie relates to Celie about the true identity of their biological father. Celie’s and Nettie’s biological father is a black landowner and farmer with a sizeable income. After he opens a successful dry goods store and blacksmith shop, white shop owners come together to complain that the successful black man is prospering while taking away their white as well as black customers. When the successful black man is lynched, whites begin to prosper, along with a few black men such as Celie’s and Nettie's stepfather, who assisted in killing the two sisters' biological father (Walker 180). Walker illustrates the self-consumption of an oppressed race. The black stepfather assists the white men in killing another black man. This action not only betrays his race, but it also promotes his own agenda.

Images of masculine malevolence and impotence abound throughout The Color Purple. Male domination in the frustration of black women’s struggle for independence is clearly the focus of Walker’s work. Alice Walker demonstrates this struggle and cycle of culture and society through the microcosm of a family. Walker sets the mood for such propagation of oppression in the opening lines of the book—the only two lines not confined to a letter format: “You better not tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (1). These two modest lines are a strong warning given by a powerful man (the stepfather believed to be the biological father) to a weak child (Celie, the stepdaughter). From these sentences onward, Celie understands that she must not communicate her desires, fears, and terrors to anybody. She begins writing to God because He is the only thing she has left. Obviously these letters are a means of self-analysis, or a confession of
sorts. During the first part of the novel, Celie’s world is filled with infinite loneliness. Never does she use the word “we” (Willis 159). Celie is ultimately alone although she manages to form a small unit of emotional support with her sister Nettie. This small connection with Nettie makes the loneliness bearable. When Nettie leaves, Celie is left alone. To fill the void, Celie turns to Mr. ______, an action which culminates in abuse.

In many cases, the victim of abuse adopts the worldview of her abuser. Celie perpetuates this phenomenon when, after suffering years of abuse from her stepfather and husband, she urges Harpo to beat Sofia. Thus, she agrees with her oppressor that women should obey, work, and be silent. After this moment of deep and profound humiliation, Celie has the first serious conversation in the novel. She must explain to the furious Sofia her attitude about beating women. Celie discovers that she is jealous of Sofia’s capacity to fight. In this revelation, both women find some sense of community and support.

Harpo also inherits the views of his persecutor, his father, when he feels he must beat Sofia simply because she is his wife and must be submissive. Harpo sits down with his father to ask for advice on how to “make Sofia mind” (Walker 37). Much like one would pass on family history to one’s descendents, Mr. ______ passes on his legacy of abuse to his son. When Harpo explains how Sofia likes to take the children and go to visit her sister whenever she takes the notion, , Mr.______’s response is, “You ever beat her?” (37). When Harpo gives a quiet and embarrassed “No,” Mr. ______ launches into his reasoning for beating one’s wife: “Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let ‘em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating…She think too much of herself anyway. She need to be
taken down a peg” (38). Internalizing his father’s advice, Harpo wants to have the physical upper hand with Sofia since she cannot be mentally broken. Harpo and Mr. ______ epitomize the black men who are powerless in white society but are somehow supposed to be authority figures in their homes. According to Mr. ______, the best course of action for a man to take to achieve authority in his home is physical violence, intimidation, and fear. In these moments when Mr. ______ perpetuates abuse and bequeaths his shortcomings, one cannot help but think of Frank and how he will inherit the role of persecutor and failure should he remain in his father's shadow. It is gender stereotyping that link Harpo and Frank.

When Shug comes into Celie’s life, she does not help Celie in a pragmatic, domestic manner, as Sofia does. Instead, Celie must conquer Shug with the only tools she has: “the feminine activities” (Royster 4). Celie cooks for Shug, helps Shug bathe, and combs Shug’s hair. No words are spoken, for Celie still seems confined by the orders of her stepfather at the beginning of the novel. Celie is timid around Shug and will not express her worship of Shug. By expressing her fears and disappointments, Celie will be violating her stepfather’s order to, “never tell nobody but God” (Walker 1). Still, in this silence, Shug manages to do what the men will not do: she thanks Celie and shows her she is important. Shug empowers Celie by taking up for her when Albert wants to beat Celie. No one has ever cared enough for Celie to speak up in her defense. The reader also gets a glimpse of Celie’s empowerment when Shug sings “Miss Celie’s Song.” Celie is incapable of bearing children because of the trauma she suffered from the repeated rapes by her stepfather. However, Shug and Celie help each other create
something beautiful through their intimate relationship together. Celie inspires Shug to create this song and Shug inspires Celie to be strong (77).

Shug serves as a positive model for how the men in Celie’s life should treat her. Shug embodies the “ideal man” in that she eventually comes to regard Celie, for she and Celie have a “courtship” period. Shug Avery finds the special qualities in Celie that have been suppressed through years of abuse. However, Shug is the “ideal man” in that she disregards societal pressures. She does not and will not believe that men must beat their wives or girlfriends to earn respect. Shug also understands that to truly love another human, one must view the other as an equal instead of property, as Mr. ______ does. Shug proves to Celie, as the men fail to prove, that love exists in a simple and pure manner, even if it is fleeting. Shug proves that while love comes and goes, self-respect is forever.

Shug Avery seems to be the only female character in Walker’s novel who escapes the male’s violence. This escape from the male’s abuse is attributed to Shug’s sexuality and gender roles being ambiguous. Albert, who normally commands control and power, takes on the submissive role when he becomes involved in a relationship with the “Queen Honeybee.” Shug and Albert used to wear one another’s clothes, which reinforces the notion that the two engage in gender role reversals. Nonetheless, even when Shug is in a weakened, sickly state, she promptly deflects Albert’s attempts at emotion. This is evident when Shug, lying in bed with fever, tells Albert, “Turn loose my goddam hand. What the matter with you, you crazy? I don’t need no weak little boy can’t say no to his daddy hanging on me. I need me a man. A man.” (49). Here, even in a weakened state,
Shug serves Albert a reminder of all of his past shortcomings and submissions not only to Shug, but to his own father.

Shug transcends sexuality in her paternal role towards Celie. Shug fails either because she takes on a male role or because she has an inherent need to fail. In Shug’s defense, she rescues Celie from the slave-like position that Albert allocates to her. Yet in transsexually playing a paternal role towards Celie, Shug’s sexual involvement with her seems to be a bizarre reenactment, without trauma, of the original paternal rape, Celie. However, Shug’s story unfolds to reveal how she abandoned all of her children by leaving them with their grandmother. Here, it appears that Shug Avery is devoid of any maternal instincts. When Celie asks Shug if she misses her children, Shug replies that she does not miss anyone. Shug serves as a co-conspirator with Albert, for three of the children she abandons are his. Together, they abandon their children and leave them with the legacy of failure as a constant foreshadowing of the abandonment and abuse that these children will undoubtedly reenact on their own children. While Shug buoys Celie above the abuse that she has suffered for so long, the reader finds Shug following the same pattern of neglect and emotional vacancy as the men in Walker’s novel.

The church in The Color Purple, with its male hierarchy, fails miserably. Celie and Shug are discounted as true members because of choices and circumstances in their lives. When Celie writes of the church, she brings up the instances in which the preacher dwells on the mother/whore dichotomy. The preacher includes Shug Avery in a sermon and tells the congregation of the evils of women such as Shug. Next, the preacher notices Celie only because she does not challenge the church’s limited view of women. However, this entails Celie being subservient. Celie recounts how she cleans the floors
and windows, makes the wine, washes the altar linen, and makes sure there is wood in the stove during the winter months. Only then, after Celie finishes these chores, does the preacher notice Celie. He says, “Sister Celie, you faithful as the day is long” (45). The preacher, or the father of the congregation, defines Celie’s faithfulness in terms of her physical labor as opposed to her spiritual devotion.

Celia finds other deficiencies within the church. In spite of all the physical and emotional abuse Celie has suffered, she defends her persecutor by saying, “Couldn’t be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what” (43). Celie then recounts her attendance to church: “The women at church sometime nice to me. Sometimes not…They some of the same ones used to be here both times I was big. Sometimes they think I don’t notice, they stare at me” (45). God the Father, as well as the church, fail Celie as a means of spiritual enlightenment as well as a means of escape from worldly suffering. Instead, the very persecutors Celie finds in her daily life are found inside the church’s doors and in the congregation’s hearts.

It is apparent that Celie suffers under the weight of patriarchal values. In order to achieve not only spiritual enlightenment but physical and emotional freedom, Celie must cease to think of God as a father figure. The danger of viewing God as a father figure is that inevitably she will be disappointed. Much like Frank was betrayed by the inadequacies of the male-dominated church, Celie, too, faces the same betrayal. As mentioned earlier, Celie’s obedience is contingent on a higher power demanding acquiescence. Like Frank McCourt’s world, Celie’s world is colored and altered by the oppression she finds not only in the men in her life, but also in the church she attends. It is Shug Avery who delivers Celie from the confines of such a strict and oppressive
religion. Shug tells Celie that God is not a He or a She, but rather an It. Shug also tells Celie that God is inside everyone and everything. For all of Celie’s life, she has felt separate from everything and everyone. Shug believes that to find God and to be spiritual, one must find beauty and love in everything and feel a part of that beauty and love.

In these moments, Celie and Shug rediscover God. Shug assists Celie in placing oppression and evil in perspective. Because Celie has never known a healthy definition of manhood and she has always associated God with a man, she transposes her unhealthy definition of manhood onto God. Shug subtly points out how man has imposed masculinity on religion and tainted its purity with an aggressive need for power and authority. Shug explains this further by stating:

Man corrupt everything. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain’t. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock. But this hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long, he don’t want to budge. He threaten, lightening, floods, and earthquakes. Us fight. I hardly pray at all (204).

The conversation between these two women further solidifies the notion that God the Father, along with earthly fathers, fails miserably. Shug suggests that the Biblical tenet of honoring one’s father and mother, no matter the circumstances, should no longer hold true for Celie.
Throughout the novel, the reader is allowed glimpses of the oppression and persecution that the black characters must face. The reader learn that Celie’s biological father is lynched due to his economic success that detracts from white-owned businesses. The reader also gains understanding into the socioeconomic constraints and frustrations of the black characters by the white characters. For example, Sofia must serve the Mayor’s wife after Sofia strikes her. Still, there are other examples of the black characters suffering at the hands of the white characters. Squeak is raped by her uncle, the warden. Sofia’s family is also torn apart. The effects are long-lasting in that some of Sofia’s children do not even remember her, because she has been confined to the Mayor’s house to serve him and his wife for a set number of years. Sofia must live in constant humiliation, for the very person she loathed and struck is the person she must serve and be submissive toward. The Mayor and his wife understand that Sofia is too strong and proud for a black woman. She must be broken and humiliated. Only then can she be assimilated into society.

Also, the reader is reminded of historical atrocities when Celie’s stepfather offers her in marriage to Albert, who looks her over as if she is property. This moment is reminiscent of a slave auction. Albert marries Celie out of desperation simply because he needs someone to look after him and his four children. Celie becomes a mule whose purpose it is to work for her “owner.” Thus, Celie is passed like a piece of property from one cruel and domineering black man to another (Willis 2).

Albert beats Celie more than he beats his own children. Celie, like an animal being broken for domestication, learns what she must do to avoid being beaten. Albert “trains” Celie to take care of the children. Celie also learns to garden and tend to his
sexual desires. Mr. ______ begins breaking Celie in the beginning of the piece when he forces her to take care of her mother and the other children. Celie must also cook, clean, garden, and serve Mr. ______ ‘s sexual whimsies. The reader sees Celie caught up in and reenacting the cycles of abuse with Albert that she was first exposed to by Mr. ______. Celie illustrates her learned tolerance of this abuse when Nettie urges her to fight Albert and his children because they are cruel to her. Celie simply replies, “But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (Walker 18). She has been so consumed with the act of survival that she has lost the ability to stand up for herself.

The two most prominent male figures in the novel are Albert and Harpo. Albert is a cowardly and weak bully. He loves Shug Avery, but because he cannot dominate her, he unleashes his rage and disgust in cruelty toward Celie. Walker illustrates Albert's cruelty and failure as a husband when Shug asks Celie why Albert beats her and Celie replies, "For being me and not you" (79). Because Nettie will not accept his advances before she runs away, Albert retaliates by hiding her letters to Celie over the years. This is also another way for Albert to exert control over both Celie and Nettie, for if they have one another, they might find power and sustenance within one another.

However, when Celie leaves him, Albert begins to change. He slowly begins to understand that his own character has cost him the love of both Celie and Shug. By the novel's end, Albert is learning to sew with Celie. He is also learning to do things for himself, which open up doors of self-esteem for Albert that he could never unlock before. He helps Celie put pockets on the pants that she makes, which demonstrate Albert's support of Celie's endeavor. He also begins patterning a shirt for people to wear with Celie's pants. The reader witnesses growth in both characters. When she is writing to
Nettie, Celie reports to her sister that, "Mr. ______ seem to be the only one understand my feeling. I know you hate me for keeping you from Nettie he say. And now she dead. But I don't hate him Nettie…” (267). Having gained in years and being far-removed from societal pressures, Albert finds himself alone beginning to re-examine his actions and motivations. Celie and Albert finally see human frailty in each other and learn to treat one another with dignity. By the novel's end, Albert is reformed enough to have become Celie's and Shug's friend. He even entertains the thoughts of "remarrying" Celie even though their marriage was never legally terminated. However, Celie halts such thoughts by telling Albert that she still does not like "frogs,” which is how she refers to men.

Harpo, Albert's son, is weak like his father. Unfortunately, his father is Harpo's only role model for being a husband. Harpo marries Sofia and also keeps a mistress, thus mirroring his father's behavior. Harpo, while keeping a mistress, constantly bemoans the fact that he cannot control his wife. He wants to grow big and strong so that he can physically overpower Sofia, yet he only grows fat. Harpo attempts to beat Sofia throughout the first part of the work. His attempts are merely comical simply because Sofia refuses to be dominated. Sofia eventually leaves Harpo to stay with her sister. However, Harpo does have one redeeming quality: he really loves Sofia and in the end, they are able to compromise in their marriage. This compromise is demonstrated when Celie hires Sofia to wait on the black folks in the store. Celie asks Harpo if he minds Sofia working and he replies,"What I'm gon mind for? It seem to make her happy. And I can take care of anything come up at home" (288). Here, Harpo extends the social boundaries of "manhood" and finds a peace unknown before.
The father and son relationship found in this family is crucial in understanding the oppressive legacy these men leave for their sons. Harpo loves Sofia, and, when Harpo discovers she is pregnant, they plan to marry. However, Albert will not hear of such a union. He dismisses Harpo's love for Sofia. The reader learns that Albert's father would not allow him to marry Shug Avery even though Shug is the only woman Albert has ever loved. This imposed dominance over the son’s choice of partners reflects the father’s desperate attempts to wield power in any way possible. These women, Shug and Sofia, both have reputations of being sexual and strong-willed. Having a woman with the aforementioned qualities in the family would disrupt the power hierarchy of the men.

Unlike Albert and Harpo, who at least retain a redeeming quality or two, Mr. ______ is completely devoid of any appealing attributes. He is an unthinking bully who not only feels no remorse about raping a young girl, but sells Celie's child without a second thought. Uneducated and unintelligent, he knows no other life but his own pathetic existence. Mr. ______ takes what he can get by physical force and intimidation, and is little more than a vicious and brutal animal. Mr. ______ is remembered for his legacy of hatred and violence, and dies satisfying his base desires with a very young wife, which only attests to how he lived his entire life.

To understand and appreciate the total picture that Walker offers requires a close scrutiny of the female characters, as well as the plot and language of their stories. Because of these interactions between the males and females, we no longer view the female characters as strictly victims and we recognize that the males are not simply villains. Although the female characters share part of the blame for the black men’s shortcomings, we understand it is the innate aggressiveness of these characters that brings
about the abuse. The oppression and abuse of the African-Americans by white society is mirrored through the abusive relationships of the black male toward the black female. The black men struggle to assert themselves in an oppressive society, and they do so through denigration and intimidation.

Although they differ culturally, one must acknowledge the similarities between Walker’s and McCourt’s stories, particularly with regard to the human condition. The men in both works struggle under socioeconomic oppression. While the men in Walker’s novel find themselves better off economically than the men in McCourt’s novel, it is only because they yield to their oppressors’ demands. Manhood in The Color Purple is initially defined through physical and emotional abuse. The men provide for their family as far as shelter and food are concerned. Manhood in Angela’s Ashes is initially defined as drunkenness, sex, poverty, and failure. Malachy McCourt attempts to adorn manhood with superficial elements that have no real bearing on his effectiveness as a man. Finally, the two works diverge in their endings. Frank must leave in order to break the legacy his father has left for him. However, Walker’s novel goes in the opposite direction in that there is a strengthening of family as opposed to McCourt’s eventual deterioration of family. Also, Walker’s characters find a confirmation of faith albeit an unconventional view of spirituality and religion. The reader finds Frank confused about certain aspects of his religion even if he is a bit more comfortable with it. Most of the characters in both works recognize their oppression and eventually pursue more healthy definitions of manhood.
CHAPTER 3

"MY FATHER, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME ?"

Most readers will accept the perception, if not the reality, that the literature of the Irish and the African-American is riddled with failing fathers. Irish literature has demonstrated such tendencies for centuries. African-American literature has shown such tendencies since the emancipation of blacks in 1865. Through years of being ostracized and oppressed by a dominant culture, these two cultures found themselves living and working side by side in the slums of America. Here, in the industrial cities of America, the Irish and the Blacks intermingled, as they both became urban under classes. They both took on the weight of doing America’s intense labor while remaining poor. Both were often vilified and suffered the oppression by a dominant culture.

In his book, The Wages of Whiteness, David Roediger writes that adjectives such as, “Low-browed and savage, groveling and bestial, lazy and wild, simian and sensuous” were used by many native-born Americans to describe Irish Catholics in the years before the Civil War (133). The similarities of these adjectives with those attributed to antebellum Blacks are apparent. It appears that "To be called an Irishman had come to be nearly as great an insult as to be called a 'nigger'” (133).

However, it is the environmental and historical reasons rather than the biological that give weight and emphasis to the comparison and grouping of the African-Americans and the Irish. In his article, “What’s White, Anyway?”, Ellis Cose describes life for emigrants in America in the early 1900s. The nation’s first naturalization act was passed by the first Congress in 1790. This act reserved the privilege of naturalization to “aliens
being free white persons” (64). This stipulation proved an enormous obstacle for blacks. However, the Irish struggled against such prejudice as well, for people of European ethnicity were considered “sub races” (65). The Irish struggled not only against proving their “whiteness,” but many faced prejudice due to their Catholic beliefs. Struggling against a hierarchy of “whiteness,” the blacks and the Irish found little hope in becoming “true Americans” as defined by the white patriarchy of the time.

After reading Walker's and McCourt's works, it seems only natural to contend that the fathers of the characters are failures simply because of the oppressive societies in which they dwell. These societies demand the fathers be cruel, absent failures. These oppressive societies are so pervasive that they are rarely acknowledged but rather simply dealt with. In Frank McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, the reader realizes that some individuals are better equipped to cope with societal pressures than others. The reader also begins to understand the false dichotomy that is fatherhood, for what constitutes a “good” father is that which is defined by the oppressive society and not that which is best for the children. In the two aforementioned pieces, the men fail at fatherhood simply because they cannot resist societal pressures such as domestic violence, drinking, and squandering the family’s livelihood on frivolous entertainment. The ramifications of this inability to resist pressure are far reaching.

Declan Kiberd, in his quest to understand Ireland’s history as well as its people, states, “In societies on the brink of revolution, the relation between fathers and sons is reversed” (Kiberd 380). Sons who are angry with their fathers comprise a great deal of Ireland’s history. Their hostility stems from the fathers either compromising with the occupying English in return for jobs or settling into a life of joblessness and alcoholism.
The anger of the sons creates a narrow view of the Irish father. No matter what the father’s course of action is, he is viewed as a defeated man. As the father begins to accept this defeat, the mother takes over as the head of the house and the priest takes over as the authority of spirituality (380). Kiberd also notices a lack of heroes and leaders for the Irish, particularly during the Irish Renaissance. Not only have the fathers accepted defeat, they believe that no modern heroes can exist. Therefore, they choose to live in the glory days of their ancestors as opposed to making a difference in their own lives and times.

Michael Collins and Eamonn de Valera, in the minds of men like Malachy McCourt, possess the strength and fortitude which these working class men do not. Malachy Sr. and men like him cling to these heroes, for the “Malachies” of the world have a gift for filtering the past in such a way as to mold it into what they would like it to be. Young Frank and his fellow classmates never realize that the Irish committed atrocities during wars. All the boys have ever heard is their fathers telling them that the Irish were heroes and martyrs while the English oppressed and destroyed. While the fathers relate stories of heroes long gone or at least far removed from their own poverty and domestic turmoil, the sons grow increasingly angry at their powerless fathers. While this rift between fathers and sons is quite common in countries in revolt, the act of defiance by a son against a father is simply meaningless since the fathers are powerless to begin with (391). The anger and violence that would normally be projected onto society in times of revolt is turned inward and focuses on the family in the absence of an external target.
Throughout McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* and Walker’s *The Color Purple*, one finds the violence, mistrust, and anger being exhibited within the family. Such anger and violence within the family seems counterproductive. Declan Kiberd pinpoints such aggression within the family by commenting, “The pressure and intensity of family life in such a setting is due to the fact that the family is the one social institution with which the people can fully identify. The law, the state apparatus, the civil service, and even the official churches are in some sense alien” (381). It is interesting to note that most countries and colonies under occupation have an intense lack of civil commitment, for they view themselves as subjects rather than citizens (380). Therefore, each son of a new generation who feels he can make a difference soon realizes the futility in his efforts and adopts his father’s broken mindset. The son soon lapses back into his family life, which was a “haven in a heartless world” (385). However, this “haven” mirrors the chaos and disorder in the outside world. In Albert Memmi’s words: “It is the impossibility of enjoying a complete social life which maintains vigor in the family and pulls the individual back to that more restricted cell which saves and smothers him” (381). The only course of action left is for the broken-spirited son to assume the place of the weak and ineffectual father.

Salman Rushdie, in *Midnight’s Children*, writes that all children of colonies possess the power to reinvent themselves or extrapolate positive images from others to piece together a whole idea of a father. Frank McCourt, by leaving Ireland for America, chooses to “reinvent” himself by leaving behind all associations with the name McCourt. These “colonized” people, whether the colonization is British occupation or that of those living on the fringes of society, as the blacks in America do, are disenfranchised with no
identity to begin with (Ignatiev 31). Emigration aside, those who either choose to stay in Ireland or are forced to must invent themselves. Reinventing is a luxury, whereas this inventing done in Ireland is a necessity.

Kiberd states, “The day on which God died will be the day on which man begins to live” (383). The oppressive Catholic Church invades family’s homes and demands devotion and sacrifice. However, the Catholic Church falls short in its expectations of men when the husbands and fathers are not reprimanded for being abusive, for being alcoholics, and for being failures. This is similarly reflected in black churches. The institution offers forgiveness and blame-free existence as long as the members confess and demand that their sons devote their souls to the Catholic Church. This is evidenced in *Angela’s Ashes* when Malachy Sr. fails utterly and yet demands that his sons do as the priests and good masters at the school tell them to. The Catholic Church exalts and protects the patriarchal values. Modern scholarship has even suggested that religious obedience left the Irish in a state of "moral childhood" (Roediger 138). Many times, those Irish who are not able to emigrate or choose not to, become arrested adolescents, for they are lacking a mature generation from which they could receive guidance. This "moral childhood" is derived from the people’s instinct to lay blame elsewhere rather than accepting responsibility for their own destinies as well as their own failures. It should be noted that it is not so much that the Catholic Church fails, as it is the perversion of the Church’s beliefs and standards by men wishing to gain power by any means necessary.

This revolt of sons against fathers has occurred throughout literature and history. However, social changes and pressures in Ireland seem to give this phenomenon an
overwhelming intensity. Terrible circumstances such as economic recessions, potato blights, and England’s occupation all brought about a large wave of emigration that left generations devoid of heroes and father figures, thus leaving the inhabitants searching their history to glean solace and inspiration from. Malachy McCourt’s constant references to past Irish heroes announces his paternal impotence.

Sensing this impotence and indecisiveness, the son begins to seek alternative avenues that may lead the family out of the squalor and poverty that the father so readily accepts. While the son assumes a more dominant role in the family, he allows his father to feel as if he maintains authority at home. Although quite cunning, this subconscious role reversal occurs at different times in the families where the father is riddled with failures.

Frank McCourt begins to take notice of his father’s paternal impotence at a very young age. With education and affirmation from school masters, and by observing families whose father did not fall so incredibly short, Frank began to assume a small authority role in his home. After the father leaves the family in dire poverty by going to England, Frank assumes the role of a surrogate father to his younger siblings by adopting strong aspects and characteristics of the different men he comes into contact with. This piecemeal acquisition of character traits allows Frank to become the man his father was not. Although most of the families in Limerick are poverty-stricken, Frank’s own dire circumstances, combined with his youth, culminate in an exceptional childhood. While the other children who are Frank’s age are following the dictates of their fathers, Frank is forced to lead. This is in stark contrast to the many other Irish males who are angry at
their fathers' tyrannical ways. Frank's revolt at an early age is derived from his father's inability to lead.

Frank begins his attempt to lead his family out of the poverty and squalor that his father left them in. First, Frank obtains education that is vital for getting a decent job and gaining a sense of self-respect. Next, Frank begins to work small, after school jobs in order to supplement the little bit of money his mother receives from the St. Vincent DePaul Society. By working and demonstrating fortitude, Frank serves as an example to his brothers where his own father failed. In his immature mind, Frank wishes to have enough money for the family to go to the movies on Saturday. This translates into Frank’s desire for his family to be like other families. He wishes for his father to send home the money he earns in England. However, not being able to keep his job due to severe conjunctivitis, Frank must look for other means of survival for his family when his mother falls ill. Frank takes it upon himself to steal lemonade for his feverish mother. He also steals food for his brothers and himself. Finally, recognizing his actions as immoral, Frank vows to take only what he and his family needs to survive. Frank realizes the futility in attempting to help his mother. She moves the family in with her cousin, who takes advantage of the family’s vulnerability. He uses Frank as an errand boy and servant and he has sexual relations with Angela. Realizing the hopelessness of the situation, Frank vows to rescue himself. He begins saving the money he makes as a telegram boy at the post office to go to America. In his heart, Frank believes that he will send for his mothers and brothers once he establishes himself in America.

Understanding the profound failure of his father, Frank finds himself fatherless. Frank finds ultimate fault with his father when he notices his mother’s tears when she
attempts to purchase food, clothing, and shelter for her sons while the father drinks away the money he earns in England, all the while insisting he can care for his family. Frank and his siblings must bear witness to this strife and turmoil all the while attempting to glean a morsel of understanding family roles.

Such patriarchal systems as those found in colonies as well as the Catholic Church should not leave men feeling stripped of authority. It would seem that dwelling in such an atmosphere that demands males be authoritative leaders would provoke the weak fathers to take charge of their familys’ welfare. However, Irish history tells a different story. The autocratic father is the weakest of all for he attempts to conceal his weakness by any means necessary. It should also seem that such a father would strive all the more to exert his power in the home if only because he is stripped of this power in the outside social and political arena. Declan Kiberd asserts that, “Patriarchal values exist in societies where men, lacking true authority, settle for mere power…Patriarchy is, rather, the tyranny wrought by weak men, the protective shell which guards and nurtures their weaknesses” (391). Through the church and through the social systems in place, Malachy Sr., although weak and ineffectual, guards his station as head of the family by citing religious tenets and social norms. He promotes complacency and denounces progress.

Malachy Sr. refuses to work to open doors of courage and enlightenment for himself and for his children. Irish culture is in decline and Malachy Sr., unemployed and failing, is left feeling hopeless. This declining culture serves to remind Malachy Sr. and other men that a new social order is coming about. Harboring such feelings, Malachy does what he is accustomed to: cling to the charismatic leaders of the past such as
Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera. His devotion to the ideas set forth by such leaders is akin to worship. This worship eases his anger, if only momentarily, and bolsters feelings of hope for the future that are coupled with feelings of helplessness. Here, Malachy Sr. pacifies his family for a little while, giving them the impression that things will improve on their own. Such character worship detracts from the father’s historical lessons. Because he realizes he is powerless to make a difference, he allows himself to become intoxicated on nostalgia and stout. Therefore, when problems arise, Malachy Sr. is content to repeat the successes and stories of leaders such as de Valera and Collins. He may even contribute one of his prior glories simply to give the illusion of a static state in which he and the men of Ireland are powerful.

Another explanation for the vast rift in the relationships between fathers and sons and the father’s seemingly inherent need to fail is the overwhelming number of Irish that emigrate. This constant emigration of people around the turn of the century left huge generation gaps between the young and then those hitting their thirties and forties. Relationships between the young and the old were strained. Also, late marriages among adults contributed to the widening gap between the young and the old (393).

Although emigration was prevalent before the 1840s and 1850s, the Potato Famine involved massive numbers of people fleeing Ireland in search of a life not burdened with poverty and oppression. Between 1845 and 1855, Ireland lost over two million emigrants, a quarter of the country's population at the time. Ireland also lost over a million more of its population to famine-associated deaths (Roediger 139). With the emigrant ships filled, attention shifts to the years following the Potato Famine and those people who remained behind. If one readily accepts Kiberd’s premise that because of
massive emigration, generations were left devoid of leaders and strong male role models, then one can easily seen that the years following the Famine were spent in recovery. Those in their twenties, thirties, and forties fled seeking a better life. This left no buffer, or intermediate generation between the young and the old, thus leaving irreconcilable rifts between the elderly and the youth. Emigration continued long after the “end” of the Potato Famine, because of stifling conditions that lingered. One can place Malachy McCourt Sr.’s birth around the turn of the century, which would leave two generations of men between the famine and Malachy’s birth who either chose to recover from the Famine or flee in search of a better life. Considering his approximate birth date, Malachy Sr. was left treading in the wake of generations devoid of strong male role models and a society whose national spirit is broken by centuries of oppression and poverty. Malachy McCourt Sr. became an emigrant after fighting for the old I. R. A., after which a price was placed on his head. Malachy arrived in America just in time for the Great Depression. Finding circumstances in the United States just as dire as they were in Ireland, Malachy Sr., along with his new bride and baby, moved back to Ireland and settled in Limerick, far from Malachy’s relations in the North. This left Malachy Sr. a displaced man.

Again, if one can accept the premise of generations of men isolated from positive male role models, then Malachy McCourt’s actions and choices fit this pattern of the isolated male stripped of allegiances to family or society. In Ireland and in America, Malachy learned the utterly selfish trade of mere survival, and taking on the responsibility of other lives is a foreign concept he is not capable of coping with.
Displaced and downtrodden, Malachy Sr. finds himself reliving the aching history of his ancestors, in which he finds himself impotent in the face of an oppressive society and church. Powerless and longing for earlier days when he possessed a fighting spirit, he constantly recalls his days in the old I. R. A.. His need for a saving role model is indicated in his drunken states in which he sings Roddy McCorley and Kevin Barry songs and asks his children if they are prepared to die for Ireland. Not only does this illustrate the aforementioned rift between the young and the old, but it is also very telling of the communication gap between Malachy Sr. and his male children. This gap is so ingrained in the society that it becomes the norm and results in a tyrannical atmosphere. Malachy Sr.’s inability to escape the cycle of institutionalized oppression is mirrored in Walker’s description of the African-American experience.

African-American men must face oppression, yet their plights and struggles, although quite similar to the Irish in terms of historical oppression, differ in degree in their manifestations. W.E.B. DuBois comments on the state of black men by contending that the African-American man is a marginal man stranded in a "double-consciousness" where he is forced to see himself through the eyes of others (DuBois 615). This double-consciousness means that the black man, no matter his character, is always seen as a burden. Because he lives in a predominately white-owned society, the black man must view his actions in terms that the white society has set forth. Nonetheless, because the emancipation of black slaves, the black man has been told to rise up and support himself, yet the white society has been readily available to make sure that he does not rise too far.

When the slaves were freed, they were given no means to support themselves except for more subtle forms of slavery such as sharecropping. The black man, as well as
some white, were never able to fully free themselves from the looming shadow of white society's economic hand. The black man is left with the task of attempting to reconcile his two selves: The African and the American. W.E.B. DuBois states in "The Souls of Black Folk":

He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of White Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood is a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and put upon by his fellows without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (615)

The South in the early twentieth century remained largely rural and agricultural. Poverty was widespread and, as stated earlier, sharecropping had replaced slavery as the central source of black labor, upon which Southern agriculture still relied. While many blacks migrated North to seek better lives, many stayed behind and struggled under the burdens of poverty and discrimination. For those who remained, life was difficult.

Black women helped rebuild the postwar South. Not only did these black women provide intense physical labor, they also provided emotional support for their male counterparts. Nonetheless, through all of this physical and emotional exertion, black women still had to struggle for equal rights. The black women had to face not only racial discrimination but also sexual oppression. The women were viewed as sexual objects partly because of the myth propagated by white plantation owners that black women were primitive and sexual, as well as anyone's for the taking (Harris 153). In The Color Purple, Celie embodies this sexual oppression as she is repeatedly raped by her black
stepfather. Celie must also suffer through sex with her husband. Sofia also reminds the reader that this type of sexual aggression and oppression is not confined to Celie, for Sofia tells Celie: "All my life I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (Walker 42). Later on, Mary Agnes is raped by her uncle. Because of her uncle’s position as a warden and a representative of white society, the rape signifies that the oppression of black women is twofold. Because society is an outward extension of family, the betrayal is magnified because it is not only a betrayal of family, but it is a betrayal of community. Capturing the plight of the black woman, Sojourner Truth spoke out about the special circumstances of black women at a meeting of the American Equal Rights Association:

There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights but not a word about the colored women, and if colored men get their rights and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women and it will be just as bad as it was before… .(Zinn 197)

Here, Truth touches on the phenomenon of black men becoming like slave masters towards their wives in an attempt to exert control over some aspect of their lives.

A possible reason for the sexual violence and oppression of black women by black men is that the fathers are sexually potent and virile. In their constant struggle to achieve power, the black men in The Color Purple sublimate their hunger for power into their violent sexual behavior. Harpo illustrates this when he attempts to make Sofia mind. In his quest to dominate Sofia, he uses violence. Also, Albert and Mr. ______ exemplify this behavior with Celie. One can assume that most of their achievements in their lives have been due to their acquiescing to the white man’s demands. Needing some
means of power, they offer their sexuality to Celie in a brutal manner. These violent drives seem to be in direct reaction to other frustrated drives in the black men’s lives. Both men want power and success but can only achieve this through yielding to the ways of the white patriarchy that is in place. Pressure to be authority figures in their families results in confusion about their roles as men. Sadly, sexual violence serves as a means of release for the men as they struggle to assert control over some aspect of their lives. However, the women in *The Color Purple* must suffer in order for the men to appease their appetites for power and control. Both sexes struggle to define their family roles within the only context available, which are those of white society.

During slavery, black families were torn apart and separated. Upon emancipation, blacks found themselves having to define what a family was and what the roles within that family entailed. Therefore, it seems natural that blacks look to the only examples of families accessible to them, which were those set forth by whites. But traditional white family roles often proved inadequate or inappropriate in the situations blacks found themselves in. These inappropriate models are evident in *The Color Purple* with the family structures being nontraditional. The relationships that constitute family are not dictated by law and the "families" shift from traditional nuclear families. These traditional family structures falter throughout the novel. As these family structures prove inadequate, white society still demanded that men act as family authority figures. Yet black men found their self-respect challenged every day in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Their self-esteem was even challenged, at times, by other blacks. Without a stable sense of self-worth, authority proved elusive and the result was sometimes behavior that verged on tyranny (Harris 156).
The black men in *The Color Purple* are cruel and abusive because of historical legacies. Walker draws on these historical legacies in allowing her characters to act in accordance to the precedents set by their ancestors. The African-Americans have been persecuted by a predominately white society. In the years since the emancipation of slaves, these black men have attempted to attain some level of success. While many have achieved success, many have only attained frustration and rejection in a society that promotes the American dream but only shares it with a select few. Therefore, as these men go home to their families, they are downtrodden and disillusioned. Their determination is dismissed callously. Here begins the cycle of abuse: the oppressed go home to find a family dependent on them. Perhaps these men perceive this family as a hindrance. Nonetheless, the fathers and husbands act out these frustrations on their families. Instead of remaining faithful rescuer of victims, the characters become persecutors when they adopt the violent means of their oppressors. Celie depicts this phenomenon when, after years of abuse from her stepfather and husband, she urges Harpo to beat Sofia. Harpo, too, inherits the views of his persecutor, his father, when he feels he must beat Sofia because she is his wife and he feels that for Sofia to be an adequate wife she must be submissive. Here, the reader finds these oppressed black men in *The Color Purple* mimicking the roles of slave masters. They exhibit these assumed roles toward their families. Mr. ______, staying in the role of slave master, dictates what his children can and cannot do. He allows Nettie to stay in school while he makes the decision that Celie is too stupid to remain in school. Also, he dictates to Albert that he cannot marry Nettie, but Celie will suffice as a wife. He exalts the virtues of Celie's
cleaning, cooking, and maternal abilities as opposed to her character, thus making her an object for possession rather than any semblance of a human.

Mr. ______'s actions here resemble those of slave owners and traders who made sure to break up families in order to keep morale low. This breaking of family units also kept slaves from being distracted from their purpose, which was to serve. Because Celie is isolated, she remains in a slave-like position in that her entire purpose for existence is simply to serve.

The fathers in *The Color Purple* fail because of the legacy they leave for their children. Albert insists upon dictating his son's decisions. Harpo loves Sofia and wishes to marry her. However, Albert, thinking this absurd, attempts to deter his son. Albert insinuates that Sofia may not be a virtuous woman and, as she is pregnant, the child could be any number of men's. Later, the reader learns that this very scene is a reenactment of Albert's conversation with his father many years earlier when Albert wanted to marry Shug Avery. Albert's father questions Shug's sexual virtue. Albert, due to his weak character, concedes to his tyrannical father's wishes.

Another legacy the men in *The Color Purple* leave for one another is that of abuse and violence. It seems necessary to reference Harpo once again in that the only relationships he has ever been witness to are those of his father. The reader understands Harpo's decision to commit violent acts against Sofia simply because all Harpo has ever known his father to do is beat women and denigrate them into passive creatures. However, this legacy, not limited to the sons, extends to the women of the novel as well. Most of the female characters in *The Color Purple* must, in some way, suffer the wrath of the men. Celie, being the primary character and example, faces the violence and
sexual oppression of her stepfather and husband. Sofia faces the violence of Harpo as well as a long history of sexual oppression from the men in her family. It appears that the men in Sofia's family were merely getting her ready for a marriage of abuse. Nettie, although she finds a life in Africa, does not escape the abuse. As mentioned earlier, decisions pertaining to Nettie's life are not hers to make. Also, after Celie marries Albert, Albert continually makes passes at Nettie and finally demands that she leave never to return. Since Nettie has nowhere else to go, this makes for a very compromising position. Mary Agnes, or "Squeak," does not escape this legacy, for she is raped by her uncle.

The history of the Irish and of the African-Americans are similar in that most aspects of their lives are dictated by a dominant, oppressive society. Both groups must view their worlds through a veil of oppression as is suggested by DuBois in “The Souls of Black Folks” (DuBois 615). It is this very veil that colors the men's actions and causes them to fail miserably through a chain reaction set off by the oppression of the dominant culture. While the two cultures share centuries of oppression, when they come to America, their stories intermingle, thus coupling their previous histories in a profound way. There are many theories as to why the men in the Irish and African-American cultures falter in their family roles. However, it is environmental and historical reasons as opposed to inherent biological factors that dictate the actions of the men in The Color Purple and Angela's Ashes. In fact, the societies in which men like Malachy and Albert dwell insist they fail because that society demands a dual role from the men that is impossible to successfully reconcile. The family views the fathers as either failing or weak depending on whether or not the fathers compromise with the oppressive society.
Declan Kiberd is careful to point out the precarious double-edged sword that the men must attempt to successfully balance. However, such a balance is impossible. Society views these men as a hindrance, yet that society demands the men be submissive in the work world. However, the men are supposed to shed this subservient behavior upon arriving home and become domestic authority figures. No matter the demands, the African-American man and the Irish man are ill equipped to meet the demands of both society and family, which contributes to their ultimate and impending failures.
CHAPTER 4
REPAIRING THE DAMAGE OF THE FATHERS

It is painful to imagine people such as Celie and Frank stuck in a situation from which they will never be able to remove themselves. At the beginning of *The Color Purple* and *Angela's Ashes*, the reader feels the intense oppression and isolation of the two main characters. Such conditions and obstacles allow the reader to visualize these two characters forever engaged in the cycle of oppression and failure. However, by the end of the individual stories, one finds Celie and Frank removed from their oppressive and abusive situations. They accomplish this transcendence by removing themselves from their difficult situations either by physical means or by spiritual means.

Frank, like many fellow Irish before him, emigrates to the United States. Finding conditions in the United States somewhat better, Frank must still contend with anti-Irish sentiments when looking for a job and a place to live. Nonetheless, physical removal is simply not enough. Frank still harbors the legacy of failing men and silent mothers. Therefore, Frank ceases to see his religion in terms set forth by his impotent father and the hierarchy-protecting priests. This breaks the cycle set forth by generations of men.

Frank begins his spiritual transcendence with Father Gregory in the Franciscan church. Frank has already begun to shed the blinders of his religious upbringing. He realizes many things about the religion his father so vehemently champions. First of all, Frank realizes that the church is employed to pacify a restless and oppressed country. The church's initial intentions and goals have been perverted to suppress the cries of frustration from a fatherless country. Secondly, the church seems to fall short in taking
care of its congregation. This is evident when Angela must face humiliation at the priest's house when begging for scraps of food to feed her children. Next, Frank understands that his father has hidden behind the church for protection from his personal shortcomings. Whether humans squander opportunity or simply do not receive it, the Church purges its members of blame and responsibility. In McCourt’s memoir, the Church assumes responsibility for overpopulation, alcoholic fathers, personal failures, and violence through some of the people’s perversion of its fundamental purpose, which is to alleviate spiritual hardships. By resigning himself to failure, Malachy Sr. places his fate in God’s hands, thus relieving himself of responsibility. Finally, Frank realizes that the church, even in its purest form, will not protect its members from suffering and experiencing difficult times.

“Charity begins at home,” yet throughout Angela’s Ashes the reader witnesses Malachy Sr. not only refusing to provide for his family but also refusing to belittle himself by asking for assistance. This would tarnish the facade of strength and masculinity that he has carefully constructed for himself.

Through Father Gregory, Frank learns that the church is not all-powerful. Heavily laden with frustrated dreams and unanswered questions, Frank wonders why such horrible things happen to decent people? Why did St. Francis not help when Frank lit candles and prayed? Why would God let Theresa Carmody die only to burn in hell? Why would God allow fathers to spend all their earnings on alcohol? As Father Gregory calms Frank, he begins to further Frank’s education in responsibility that was started by Mr. O’Halloran when the teacher had the students sell raffle tickets to buy the more needy boys in the class shoes for winter. Father Gregory informs Frank that God loves
him but he must also love himself. Praying and devotion are wonderful, but there is a certain amount of responsibility Frank must assume for himself. However, Father Gregory subtly teaches Frank that there are some things such as ineffective fathers and downtrodden mothers that are beyond Frank’s control.

It is within this moment that Frank realizes that his life and fate are not solely controlled by the church and other such institutions. Frank begins to flourish once he gains such an understanding. McCourt writes that after leaving the church, he ran through the streets of Limerick carefree and happy once again. This is the beginning of Frank’s spiritual transcendence in which he allocates a certain amount of devotion, responsibility, and respect to the church as well as a certain amount of respect and responsibility to himself. Frank begins to understand the qualities of balance and equilibrium that his father demonstrated only through opposites and contradictions.

Like many other women in the South around the time of the Great Depression, Celie, until she inherits her biological father’s dry goods store, has little monetary means with which to remove herself from her current oppressive situation. Violence and isolation have become a way of life for Celie. However, it is when Celie ceases to think of God as a domineering white male that she begin to “spiritually remove” herself from the desperate situation that she has become so mired in.

Celie’s obedience to the men in her life is contingent on the tenets of the church and the perceived domineering white God who demands acquiescence. The oppressiveness of Celie’s religious beliefs mirrors the life Celie lives in her secular world. Shug assists Celie in altering her definition of God and religion by changing the
way Celie perceives God. As an It, rather than a He or a She, God can be found in everything.

While Celie does not physically abandon the oppressive and abusive world that she has grown so accustomed, she does however, spiritually transcend it. She recreates the world in which she lives by not only altering her perception of religion but also learning self-respect and personal responsibility as Frank McCourt does. Celie learns that while the white and black men influence the world to a great degree, they do not, however, have the strength and influence to reign over her soul.

Removal of the victims of abuse, neglect, and oppression aside, it is difficult to determine whether or not the shortcomings of the men in these two novels can be corrected. Environmental and historical factors play an important role in dictating the men’s actions and responses. There are few examples of characters from these two cultures within this time frame that do not have to face such factors as oppression and poverty brought on by religious, social, and political influences. One can safely speculate that Frank’s and Celie’s lives, as well as their siblings’ lives, would be much improved if the men did not fail so. Reconciliation of Frank and Celie with their fathers and church is unlikely because resolution entails responsibility and acceptance of blame from both sides. Neither the fathers nor the churches in these two novels see their actions or inactions as wrong. Malachy Sr. attempts to conceal his shortcomings behind the notion that he has a queer way about him because he is from the North. The Church admits no fault because it is supposed to be a haven for the poor and bereft, yet this haven seems to be only for a select few who are dictated by the powerful patriarchy. Alphonso admits no fault and dies believing he is justified in the way he has lived his life. Albert and Harpo
are the only two men who offer a glimmer of hope of reconciliation for they seem well on their way to personal change by the end of *The Color Purple*. Albert, after being deserted by the two women he depended on for his power, discovers through conversations with Celie that he has behaved badly. Age and loneliness force Albert into evaluating his morals and purpose. Harpo, being the closest version to McCourt in *The Color Purple*, finally denies his legacy of abuse and oppression by allowing Sophia to be the person she needs to be. Harpo also takes on more responsibility rather than fall prey to the notions of his father that certain things are women’s work.

There is overwhelming evidence to support the notion that the men in these two novels are destined to fail and will continue to pass on such dark legacies. Blame and denial seem to be the main tools of characters such as Malachy Sr. and Mr. ______. However, characters such as Shug, Celie, Frank, Harpo, and eventually Albert allow the hope of reconciliation between parental figures who seem destined to fail and the children who are heirs to these shortcomings and oppressions.
There is no questioning the fortitude of Celie and Frank. However, the frustrations in these two characters’ lives come in many forms, whether it be the questioning of their faith or the frustrated dreams of the men delivered either in the form of a backhand or a night of drinking in the pubs. The tragedies of Celie and Frank relate back to the fortitude that they embody. It is their potential in the midst of chaotic domestic and social atmospheres that illustrates the miring effects of oppression and failure.

Frank and Celie, in their youth, do not understand why the men in their lives disappoint in such profound ways. They begin connecting the failures to the acts that bring Celie and Frank, as well as their families, the most misery. Frank does this when he notices his mother’s tears when the father comes home drunk. Celie makes such connections when she fears Mr. ______’s sexual advances, for she understands in a youthful way, that such advances are not the norm and they cause her great discomfort. Frank and Celie live in a precarious state, for socially, they are outsiders looking in. However, on the domestic front, they are insiders looking out. Given such vantage points, it is no wonder that the two characters and critics alike view the oppression in these two novels as peripheral rather than the thrust of the failing fathers and the patriarchal institutions. Through maturation and assistance from others, Frank and Celie, along with the reader, begin to see the rottenness that such tyranny has caused throughout the years.
Characters such as Celie and Frank exist outside the norm. Considering the obstacles and subjugation in their lives, they should either end up oppressors like their fathers or voiceless victims like their mothers. Frank and Celie are not equipped at birth to live up to their full potential. They are born into circumstances that would normally hinder success and achievement. The two most important characters in a child's life, the mother and the father, either fail or are absent for Celie and Frank. Although Celie and Frank eventually gain some understanding and peace by the novels’ ends, it is unproblematic to distinguish why, “’Tis hard to dance with one shoe” (McCourt 219).


WORKS CONSULTED


Turner, Jonathan H., Royce Singleton Jr., and David Musick.  *Oppression: A Socio-


VITA
GWENDOLYN NICOLE HALE

Personal Data:  Date of Birth:  November 6, 1975
Place of Birth:  Kingsport, Tennessee
Marital Status:  Single

Education:  Sullivan North High School, Kingsport, Tennessee

East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee;
English/ Philosophy, B.A., 1999.

East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee,

Professional Experience:  Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University,


Papers Presented:  “‘Ten Things I Hate about You’: Surviving Ovarian Cancer.”