

Grades 9–12

Angela's Ashes

Frank McCourt

SAMPLE

Genre: memoir

Setting: Brooklyn and Poughkeepsie, New York; Limerick, Ireland

Point of View: first person

Themes: familial bonds, poverty, religion, survival, love, death, disease, alcoholism, patriotism, perseverance, class-based prejudice, gender, and nationality

Conflict: person vs. society, person vs. self, person vs. person, person vs. nature

Style: narrative; often stream-of-consciousness, with many voices mixed together in the same paragraph

Tone: Though often bleak and harrowing, the memoir is laced with humor and warmth, and the underlying dream of returning to America propels the story.

Date of First Publication: 1996

Summary

Malachy and Angela McCourt meet in Brooklyn, New York after emigrating from Ireland. Angela quickly becomes pregnant with Francis (Frank) McCourt, and her family aggressively persuades Malachy to marry Angela. They soon have more children: Malachy a year after Frank, then the twins Oliver and Eugene the next year. When a fifth child, Margaret, dies, the family decides to move to Ireland in hopes of finding better job opportunities and a new life. Though their Irish relatives give them a cold welcome, the McCourts receive much-needed support while the family searches for a place to stay. The family settles in Limerick, where Angela's family lives and where Malachy is disdained because he is from Northern Ireland where Protestants live. Malachy has trouble finding work, and when he does work, he often drinks all of his wages and leaves nothing for his starving family, forcing the family to live off "the dole," or welfare. It is hardly enough to buy food and pay the rent, and members of the family suffer from various diseases brought on by the unsanitary conditions in which they live. Oliver dies, and Eugene quickly follows. Frank, little Malachy, and their new brothers Michael and Alphonsus find small pleasures in games they play with each other, and they attend school and church. At age ten, Frank contracts typhoid fever and almost dies, but he discovers the joy of poetry and Shakespeare while in the hospital. After a few more years of suffering and hardship, their father secures factory work in England during World War II and promises to send home his wages to help the family. He doesn't, and the family is reduced to begging and stealing to get by. After a brief trip home at Christmas, their father leaves once more for England and is never heard from again. The family moves in with Angela's cousin Laman, but the living situation is awkward and Frank leaves after securing work as a telegram boy. He also earns money by writing letters for a moneylender, who eventually dies. Her death provides him with funds to leave Ireland when he is 19 years old. Although it breaks his heart to leave his mother and family behind, Frank sails back to America to begin the new life he has dreamed of for years.

About the Author

Frank McCourt was born on August 19, 1930, in Brooklyn, New York to Malachy and Angela McCourt, two Irish immigrants who returned to Ireland in 1934. As the family struggled through poverty, disease, and death, Frank McCourt and his brothers played in the streets of Limerick and attended school. At age ten, McCourt survived a battle with typhoid fever, and by age 13, he began working odd jobs and stealing food to help his family survive after his alcoholic father abandoned them. McCourt saved money and fulfilled his childhood dream of returning to America when he turned 19. He was then drafted by the army and spent time in Germany before returning to New York where he attended New York University and received his M.A. from Brooklyn College. McCourt taught English at McKee High School and Stuyvesant High School in New York for almost 30 years before retiring and completing a memoir about his childhood. Published in 1996, *Angela's Ashes* won the Pulitzer Prize, the ABBY Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. The book was adapted into a film in 1999, and the memoirs *'Tis* (1999) and *Teacher Man* (2005) told the story of McCourt's life after returning to America. Both became bestsellers.

Background Information

The Great Depression began in 1929 due to the collapse of the stock market and the banking system in America. The problem quickly spread across the globe and lasted for more than a decade in most places. Lack of work, low wages, and extreme debt forced many families to live in stark poverty, beg for food, search for menial work, or die from disease and starvation. Great Britain suffered a depression after World War I and had not fully recovered by the time the Great Depression struck in 1929. Reports in Great Britain (which includes Scotland, England, Wales, and parts of Ireland) indicate more than 25% of the population lived on a subsistence diet and suffered from severe malnutrition. Ireland, which fought a bloody war with England for independence during the 1920s, had similar, if not worse conditions. Unemployment and emigration was high, especially for Protestants and Northern Irish, who were scorned as supporters of the English by the Catholic majority. The Catholic Church dominated the social infrastructure of Ireland and promoted extremely conservative policies such as censorship, banning divorce, and forcing children of Protestants to be raised as Catholics. The Catholic Church also maintained most hospitals, schools, and other important social services, serving as a place the poor could turn to in their time of need. Though Ireland remained neutral in World War II, thousands volunteered to serve in the British armed forces and worked in factories to produce much-needed supplies for the troops. Although Ireland suffered through frequent economic collapses throughout the 20th century, the 1990s brought great prosperity to the country, and many conservative social policies were removed from Irish law.

Characters

Francis (Frank) McCourt: protagonist and narrator; As the eldest brother, he takes on the responsibility of supporting his siblings and mother as much as he can, often doing more than a young boy should; suffers many ailments including typhoid fever and infected eyes; becomes frustrated with the ways of the strict Catholic Church, although he follows as many rules as he can; saves enough money to return to America

Angela McCourt: Frank's mother; suffers from intense depression due to the deaths of three of her children; struggles to hold the family together while dealing with a loving yet alcoholic husband; resorts to begging and accepting welfare to support her children

Chapters X–XII

Angela becomes ill and bedridden, barely able to take in whatever food and drink Frank can steal as he attempts to care for the family. Frank and his brothers steal coal for heat and beg for food, which attracts the attention of Guard Dennehy, who discovers Angela is ill. Angela has pneumonia, and the children stay with Aunt Aggie and Pa Keating while she is in the hospital. Malachy returns from England for a brief visit just as Angela is released from the hospital. Angela resorts to outright begging to get by, as witnessed by Frank. Frank plays football (soccer) with his team, The Red Hearts of Limerick, and they each wear a red heart Frank cut from his mother's old red dress. Frank helps Mr. Hannon make coal deliveries and gets to drive the horse-drawn "float" through town, impressing his friends, but the coal dust aggravates his eyes. Malachy returns from England again for Christmas, but the boys and Angela give him a hard time for never sending money. Malachy leaves, and Frank never sees him again. Money becomes so scarce that the McCourts are evicted from their house and must live with Angela's cousin, Laman Griffin. Life there is awkward at best, and the family cleans Laman's house to make more room for everyone. Frank begins to fetch books from the library for Laman, and Frank's brother Malachy leaves the family to join the Army School of Music in Dublin.

Vocabulary

sallow
lamentations
contraption
atrocious
gangrene
mandolins
vespers
arrears
liniment
brigade
gallivanting

Discussion Questions

1. How is Frank able to support his family when his father is in England and his mother is sick? How do the boys attract the attention of the police? (*Frank goes out and steals food for them. He takes lemonade from a truck, bread from a van, and a box of food from someone's front porch. Frank and his brothers also beg for and steal coal from other families. The boys' plight is discovered by the police after Michael brags to a rich woman that his brothers are taking care of the family and gives her his address. Later, the police arrive to discover Angela sick in bed.*)
2. Discuss the differences in how Aunt Aggie and Pa Keating treat Frank and his brothers. (*Aunt Aggie takes the children in, feeds them, keeps them clean, gives them a place to sleep, and keeps their lives in order, but she does all of this with disdain for their parents and upbringing, and she shows little actual love or affection. She scolds them often for laughing or being dirty and sometimes tells them she can't stand the sight of them. Pa Keating allows Aunt Aggie to run the house and direct the children, but he shows much more affection for the children. He offers them food from his own dinner, jokes with them, spoils them when Aggie is not around, and talks to them like real people. Frank begins to look up to Pa Keating because of his optimism, his ability to resist getting drunk at the pubs, and the fact that he brings home his wages—all things that are the opposite of Malachy McCourt. Though Aggie is the one who runs their lives, the boys adore Pa Keating.*)
3. What effect does witnessing Angela begging for food have on Frank? What does he worry about? (*Watching his mother beg for food in the crowd of people at the priest's door is shocking for Frank. He is ashamed because he thinks begging is the worst thing they have ever done to make ends meet. Frank worries that neighbors or friends will know his mother is a beggar and that this will disgrace the family. He also imagines what the kids at school will call him if they find out his mother is a beggar.*)
4. What happens to Mikey, Frank, and Peter in the pub? Why do you think Frank believes Mikey? Do you think there is something more to Peter's sudden and drastic decision? (*Frank, his friend Mikey, and Mikey's father go to the pub for Mikey's first pint of beer. Mikey tells Frank he*

Characters With or Without Character

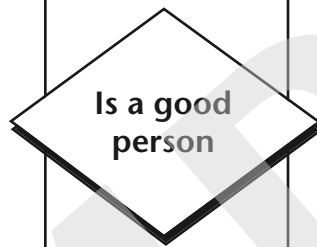
Character is evaluated by one's actions, statements, and by the way one treats others.

Directions: For each of the attributes listed in the center of the page, write the name of one character from the book who has this trait, and the name of one character who does **not** have this trait. After each character's name, give an example of an action or statement that proves you have properly evaluated the character.

Yes

No

Name: _____
Proof: _____



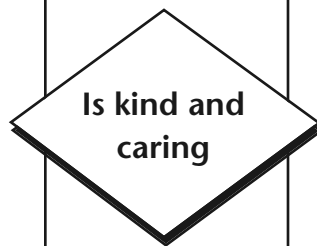
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Sociogram

Directions: On the "spokes" surrounding each character's name, write several adjectives that describe that character. How does one character influence another? On the arrows joining one character to another, write a description of the relationship between the two characters. Remember, relationships go both ways, so each line requires a descriptive word.

