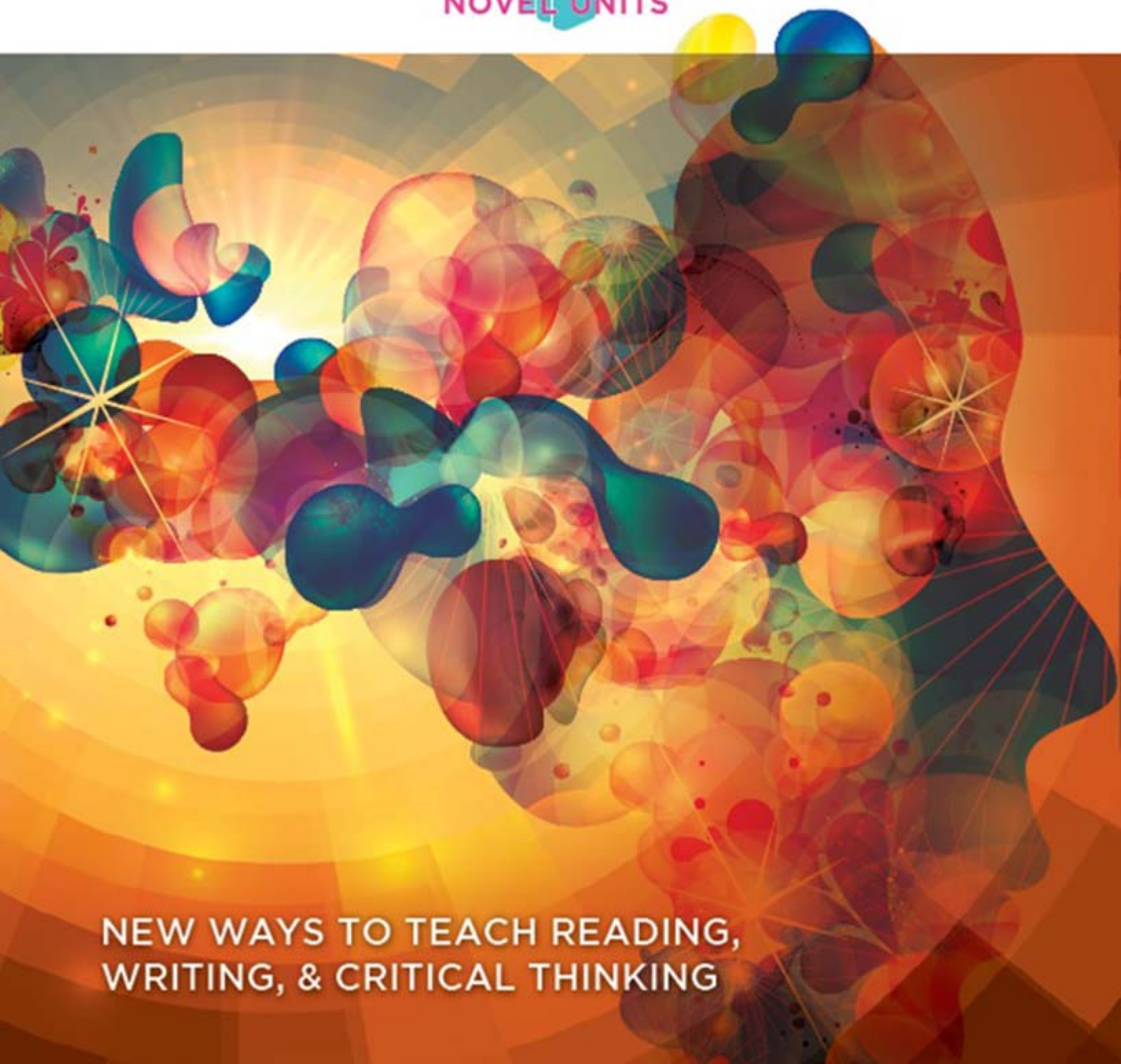


Teacher Guide

Grades 9–12

Angela's Ashes

Frank McCourt



**NEW WAYS TO TEACH READING,
WRITING, & CRITICAL THINKING**



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ANGELA'S ASHES

by
Frank McCourt

Teacher Guide

Written by
James H. Duncan

Note

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Skills and Strategies

Critical Thinking

Analyzing, inference, research,
opinions, predictions

Comprehension

Plot development,
compare/contrast,
pros/cons, point/counterpoint

Literary Elements

Foreshadowing, theme,
irony, symbolism, conflict,
characterization

Listening/Speaking

Presentation, reenactment,
discussion

Vocabulary

Definitions, application

Writing

Essay, poetry, opinion, memoir,
research paper, list, synopsis

Across the Curriculum

Literature—Irish authors and
poets, Charlotte M. Brame;
History—World War II, Irish
Independence, important figures
in Irish history and folklore,
the Great Depression, ethnic
groups in Brooklyn, New York;
Art—alternate cover, paintings,
collage, sketch, Irish songs,
Irish dancing

Chapter I

Frank McCourt begins his memoir by stating that no miserable upbringing can compare to that of the poor Catholic Irish childhood. Though both were born in Ireland, Frank's parents meet during the Great Depression in Brooklyn, New York and are soon married, with a child on the way. Frank is born in 1930, and his brother Malachy is born a year later. The twins Oliver and Eugene are born a year after that. When their father is working and bringing home his wages, life is good for the McCourt family. Angela sings for the children and there is food to eat. But soon enough, their father begins drinking away his wages, returning from the pub late at night singing sad songs and lamenting the woeful state of Ireland. Though Angela tries to remind Malachy of the desperate state of their family, Malachy continues his drinking. He soon loses his job, but Angela has a wish granted when she gives birth to her first and only daughter, Margaret. Margaret dies in her sleep only weeks later, causing Angela and Malachy to fall into a deep depression. Neighbors try to help the family while Frank's parents grieve, and Angela's cousins write to her mother to send money for tickets to Ireland. The family leaves America hoping to find better times in their native land.

Vocabulary

loquacious
cacophony
consumptive
catastrophe
novelty
Prohibition
hangdog
sacrilege
beholden
challah
consecrated

Discussion Questions

1. Frank recalls "Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we knew it was only the rain" (p. 12). What might this mean? *(The Catholic Church was a strong influence on the daily life of the Irish, and the vast majority of Irish attended church on a regular basis. However, since the church had more funds than the common folk and could afford to heat and maintain their buildings, many of the poor Irish sought this comfort since most of their homes were poorly heated, damp, and miserable.)*
2. Frank McCourt inserts songs and poems throughout his memoir. Why do you think he does this, and how might it help him tell his story? *(Songs and poetry are very important in Irish culture, and when the poor had limited means of entertainment, singing songs provided a way to remember their ancestors and keep their spirits up in dark times. Many of the songs are patriotic, and this shows the many Irish put on the actions of their heroes who fought for independence from the English. The poems and songs help McCourt tell his life story because they emphasize the important figures the Irish kept close to and during these hard times.)*
3. Why do you think Frank McCourt does not use quotation marks to show whom the people are speaking? Is this style helpful in telling his tale? *(Answers will vary, but because there are no quotation marks when someone else is speaking, the text often flows from one voice to the next without a perceptible break. This blends action, words, and thoughts of the narrator with those of the other characters, creating a stronger sense of intimacy. The narrator and other speakers become more closely bound in this way, sometimes making it hard to tell them apart. The reader must pay closer attention to who is speaking. Some readers will be uncomfortable with this change from traditional storytelling while others will find the method unique and effective.)*
4. How does Malachy and Angela's wedding come about? Does Malachy wed Angela willingly? *(After a brief romance with Malachy, Angela becomes pregnant. Angela's cousins, the MacNamara sisters, and their husbands visit Malachy in the pub to coerce him to marry Angela. Though Malachy agrees, he secretly plans to escape to California. However, he drinks his escape money away and wakes up broke the next day. He finally concedes, and the two are married a few months before Frank is born.)*

5. What symbolic significance is there to Frank's thought that "Malachy has dog blood and the dog has Malachy blood" (p. 20)? *(Answers will vary, but on one level the statement shows Frank's innocence and naiveté in thinking his brother and the dead dog have the same blood. On a more symbolic level, the statement may reveal an unfair Depression-Era stereotype about the Irish and other minority groups—that their blood is no better than that of a common dog. Minorities were treated poorly and lived in relative squalor during that period of time, and the statement connects the lives of minorities with the life of a stray dog, all struggling to survive.)*
6. What story does Frank's father tell him that Frank considers his own? Why does he make such a claim to this story? *(Frank's father tells him the story of Cuchulain. Because Malachy tells the story to Frank before anyone else, Frank "owns" the story and the bond with his father it represents. For the story to be told to anyone else would mean Frank must give up this bond with his father.)*
7. Describe Angela, and explain how she changes in the first chapter. Is she a good mother? Is she what you would consider "strong"? *(Frank sees his mother's troubles began when she was born, implying her life has always been difficult. While she seems hopeful during most of the first chapter, he hopes she will as the family struggles with Malachy's alcoholism and Margaret's death. Answers will vary. Angela seems rather passive at times, crying when Malachy runs off to the pub rather than forbidding his drinking or giving him an ultimatum. She also gives in when Malachy insists that Frank does not need a middle name, although her second son is given a middle name, which may show she does win some battles. In good times she sings and appears to love Malachy, but in bad times she sinks into depression and wants to be alone. She fights with Malachy to make him understand that the children need food and support, but this is a losing battle. While Angela's cousins are more assertive and assertive with the bus, and Angela has a hard time keeping Malachy in line. While Angela constantly fights an uphill battle to support her children, some may see her bouts of depression, her leaving the children to fend for themselves when Malachy is out, and her inability to rebuff her alcoholic husband as weaknesses.)*
8. In his book *The Grapes of Wrath*, author John Steinbeck wrote, "If you're in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones." How is this idea exemplified in the first chapter of the book? *(Although most of the McCourts' neighbors and shop owners are in dire financial situations and live in the poor areas of Brooklyn, they offer food, assistance, and go out of their way to help the family in their times of need. For example, the Italian shop owner probably realized that Frank stole bananas, but he still gives Frank a bag of fruit to help feed his siblings. Frank's neighbors Mrs. Leibowitz and Mrs. MacNamara cook for the children and share their meals even though they have families of their own to worry about.)*
9. Do you think Phil, Maria and Dalia's assistance is very helpful at the end of the first chapter? Is returning to Ireland a good idea? *(Answers will vary, but it seems the MacNamara sisters are attempting to rid themselves of a problem more than actually help the McCourts. While the McCourts' economic situation in America is bleak, there is no telling if their life in Ireland will be any better, especially with Malachy's inability to hold a steady job.)*
10. **Prediction:** What might Angela's illness in the last paragraph of chapter 1 foreshadow?

Supplementary Activities

1. Research the stories and myths of the iconic Irish figure Cuchulain. Write a brief essay about your findings, and compare Cuchulain to myths and heroic figures from other cultures. Are there similarities? differences? Be prepared to discuss your findings in class.

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.

