



TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Angelina's Ashes

Frank McCourt

READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

Angela's Ashes

Frank McCourt

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

ISBN 978-1-50203-577-6

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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

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.

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
catarrh
novenas
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 have limited means of entertainment, singing songs provides a way to both remember their ancestors and keep their spirits up in dark times. Many of the songs are patriotic, and this shows the value 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 mind during these hard times.)*
3. Why do you think Frank McCourt does not use quotation marks to show when other 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 the 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.)*

Word Map

Directions: Choose six of the vocabulary words from Chapter I of *Angela's Ashes*. Find each word's definition, synonyms, and antonyms, and use each word in an original sentence.

Synonyms

Antonyms

WORD

Definition in your own words

Used in a sentence

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.

