

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Angela's Ashes

by Frank McCourt

written by Rita Truschel

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Angela's Ashes

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. identify the writing conventions of memoir as a genre.
2. identify conflict in the narrative arc of character, setting, plot, and theme.
3. identify irony.
4. identify and analyze the use of literary elements such as absurdity, allusion, dialect, euphemism, idiom, euphony, impression, understatement, sarcasm, satire, paradox, mood, pathos, persona, tone, and voice.
5. analyze the effect of word choice and sentence structure to express meaning, tone, and theme.
6. analyze the depiction and treatment of women in a patriarchal, misogynist society as a theme.
7. analyze the development of religion as a theme.
8. analyze the relationship between Frank McCourt's purpose and audience and his narrative's elements and structure.
9. offer a close reading of *Angela's Ashes* and support interpretations and assertions using evidence from the text and knowledge of his biography, literary allusions, and period history.
11. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.
12. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.

Introductory Lecture

I. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND MEMOIR

Autobiography is the story of a person's life, written by that person. Since ancient times, autobiography has been the purview of people with important and lasting accomplishments, for the purposes of explanation, self-justification, public instruction, moral example, and entertainment. With the rise of the popular press in the seventeenth century, autobiography expanded to include popular celebrities and lesser persons with significant or scandalous experiences.

Memoir is a form of autobiography, typically focused on meaningful incidents within a related time span. Memoir relies on the author's memories, feelings, and interpretation of events' significance. The memoir author is selective, not all-inclusive. The degree of intimacy can vary. Historically, a famous public figure could focus on major events and participants, abilities, goals, and outcomes without disclosing much about personal or interior life. Since the 1980s, memoirs have become popular on the strength of the authors' emotional "honesty" and analysis of singular experiences, told in a dramatic narrative fashion.

Confession is a related genre in which private, secret, or shocking details of an author's life are revealed. The term "confession" has connotations from theology, as in professing beliefs and redemption, as well as the law and admission of guilt. The early Christian bishop St. Augustine (354-430) wrote his *Confessions* to reflect on his childhood, lusty youth, and intellectual and spiritual growth leading to his religious conversion. Augustine's *Confessions* remains influential in Western civilization.

There are fictional confessions as well, for example, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722).

Autobiography has value as a record of an author's direct and intimate knowledge and perceptions. Autobiographical writers may incorporate feedback from family and friends, journalistic investigation, and research to add information, verify impressions, and widen perspective. Effective memoirs, on the other hand, delve into larger themes of history, culture, gender, or spirituality.

Whether writing autobiography or memoir, authors writing about themselves may be unreliable narrators who withhold or misjudge information out of ignorance, faulty memory, bias, or self-protection. A careful reader must pay attention to the author's persona, the impression that the writer projects.

Topics for Discussion and Essays

1. How can a reader evaluate honesty and authenticity in writing?
2. What factors should be considered before writing about someone's life? About one's own life?
3. What are the advantages of living in a homogenous society? What are the disadvantages?
4. What circumstances justify challenging authority or social conformity?
5. How do stereotypes arise? What is their effect?
6. What sacrifices should one be willing to make to achieve a goal? Does achieving a worthy goal justify even immoral, unethical, or illegal means?

Angela's Ashes

Chapter 1

1. Frank McCourt begins his memoir by wondering how he survived his childhood after his family returned to Ireland. What tone does McCourt use as he characterizes the conditions of his youth when he writes, "It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while"?

2. What is the Feast of the Circumcision? How does this allusion contribute to the description of Limerick's weather?

3. The description of the rain in Limerick is notable for its **euphony**—its pleasing sound. Identify the literary techniques used in the description.

4. McCourt characterizes his father's life with a pun about "a price on his head." What does this pun indicate about McCourt's attitude toward his father?

Chapter 5

1. What does the poem "The Man from the North" imply? Why does Angela laugh when she recites it?

2. Why does Angela insist that Frank take Irish dancing lessons despite the expense?

3. For what intended effect does McCourt describe his attempt at Irish dancing in long, run-on sentences?

4. The Arch Confraternity is cited as evidence that Limerick is the holiest city in Ireland. Do the boys' reasons for joining the organization support this claim to fame?

5. What does Frank's preparation to be an altar boy indicate about his father? What does this episode reveal about his mother?

Chapter 10

1. Examine how the author renders an impression of Limerick kitchens on the way to Kathleen O'Connell's shop. How does the sentence structure reflect the action?

2. What is the effect of the one-word sentence "Lemonade"?

3. At age eleven, Frank does not know what to do in his aunt's house. Based on the narrative to this point, what can you infer about the causes of Frank's uncertainty?

4. Frank's perspective on his family changes between the meal at the beginning of the chapter and the meal at the end. Summarize how Frank's attitude shifts up to the chapter's conclusion.

Chapter 15

1. Frank is surprised by his aunt's generosity on the morning he applies to be a telegram boy. What causes Aunt Aggie to buy Frank new clothes? Have there been any indications that she might do him such a favor?

2. Contrast Frank's anticipation of his first job at the telegram office to the way he is treated upon arrival.

3. When Frank receives his first wages, how does his attitude about money change?

4. The author reports that the best tips come from the poor. What can you infer is the reason?

5. Carefully read the paragraph about Toby Mackey, the boy who aspires to be a newspaper reporter. What literary techniques create euphony?

6. Compared with the saints in Chapter 14, what kinds of people does Frank encounter while delivering telegrams?
