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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Angela's Ashes

by Frank McCourt

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Objectives

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

1. identify the genre to which the work belongs, the memoir.
2. describe life among the Catholic poor in Limerick, Ireland, during the Great Depression and World War II.
3. discuss significant conflicts and tensions felt in Depression-era Ireland, including:
 - the English vs. the Irish
 - the North of Ireland vs. the South of Ireland
 - Catholics vs. Protestants
 - rich vs. poor
4. discuss the cultural problem of alcoholism and its impact on the writer.
5. analyze McCourt's relationship with both of his parents and his feelings toward them.
6. infer the writer's subtle and complex feelings toward the Catholic Church and its positions.
7. discuss the importance of brotherhood and community in McCourt's childhood.
8. discuss the real-life role of cigarettes, as well as their symbolic role in this memoir.
9. analyze the writer's use of humor and comic relief to temper the tragedy of his story
10. compare McCourt's memoir to that of a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel.
11. cite examples of irony in the memoir and explain how McCourt uses this literary device.
12. describe the writer's style and narrative voice.
13. examine McCourt's use of dialect and present tense in his narrative.
14. identify the writer's tone and explain how tone reflects McCourt's feelings toward his subject.
15. cite examples of the following literary terms:
 - simile
 - metaphor
 - onomatopoeia
16. discuss the meaning of the title of the work.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What do you think is the significance of the title of the book? Why is the book not titled *Malachy's Ashes*?
2. Before you started the book, what were your expectations about it? Had you heard of the book before? What did the title lead you to expect? What did you think of the author's omission of his parents and particularly his mother from either the dedication or the acknowledgments?
3. Discuss Frank's relationship with his father. What kind of influence does Mr. McCourt have over his son? Do you think Frank sympathizes more with his father or his mother?
4. What gives the book a novelistic quality?
5. Consider the following quotation from the first page of the book and discuss McCourt's meaning: "When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while."
6. Describe the overarching tone of this memoir. Is it bitter and resentful, or is it something else? Did you find the tone surprising? Why or why not?
7. Mr. McCourt's abandonment of his family happens abruptly. One year, Dad comes home from England for Christmas, and, after that visit, he does not make an appearance in McCourt's narrative. Although Frank is conscious of his father's absence, he never speaks of Dad's disappearance as abandonment. What explanation can you give for this?
8. Most of the book—a memoir—is written in the present tense. Why would McCourt choose the present tense for a book rooted in his memory?
9. What do you think the theme of *Angela's Ashes* is?
10. What sense is there that Mr. Timoney, locked away in the City Home, is one of the most sane and rational people in the book? Why does this seem to be the case?
11. Frank as a small boy strongly believes that stories and songs belong to one person. He says, "...I wonder what kind of world is it where anyone can sing anyone else's song." Why do you think sharing songs and stories is so threatening to Frankie? Why does he think that, when his father tells him a Cuchulain story the story is his alone?
12. Discuss the importance of community and the charity of strangers in this book. How does the kindness of strangers compare with the McCourts' treatment by their relatives?
13. Describe McCourt's narrative voice. What techniques and devices does he use to capture his point of view from his youth?

Angela's Ashes

Chapter 1

Vocabulary

cacophony – harsh sound
catarrh – a chronic inflammation of the nose and air passages
hangdog – sad, downcast
jakes* – an outhouse, a privy
loquacious – excessively talkative
novenas – in the Roman Catholic Church, periods of prayer lasting nine days
pious – devotedly religious
pompous – arrogant, self-important
puce – dark red, almost purple
shiftless – lazy; lacking in ambition
skivvy* – a female domestic servant
speakeasies – during Prohibition, places where alcohol was sold illegally

1. To what genre does *Angela's Ashes* belong?

2. How does the adult Frank McCourt feel when he looks back on his childhood?

3. What nationality is the McCourt family, and what religion do they practice? What does Frank McCourt say could be expected from such a heritage?

16. What does young Frankie misunderstand about blood?

17. Mr. McCourt tells Frankie a story that the boy believes to belong to him. What is the subject of the story?

18. Why do the children spend so much time unattended at the playground?

19. How can the boys tell when their mother is happy because their father has found a job at last?

20. What happens after Dad's three weeks of work?

21. How does Mam cope when Dad does not bring his wages home on the fourth Friday of his job?

Chapter 9

Vocabulary

bockety* – wobbling
caul – the membrane covering a newborn's head
docket – a voucher or paper order
fagged out* – completely tired out
famished – extremely hungry
gods* – the upper balcony in the theater
knacker* – a man who hauls away dead horses
serviettes – napkins
tinker – a street vendor or odd-job man
trifle – a layered dessert
wireless – a radio

1. Why is Mam willing to “face eternal damnation”?

2. What happens in England to improve the fortunes of many people in the lanes of Limerick?

3. How does McCourt imply that Mam's declaration affects Dad's decision to go to England?

4. Why does Dad ridicule the families whose lot improves during the war?

6. How does Mam react to Frank's news that he is going to America? For what does she hope?

7. How does Frank feel about leaving Limerick?

8. What natural phenomenon marks Frank's going-away party?

9. Why do feelings of guilt burden Frank as he sets sail from Ireland?

10. Who befriends Frank on the ship to America?

11. When Frank sees New York from the ship, he observes, "...the sun turns everything to gold." How is this imagery symbolic? How does Frank think of America?
