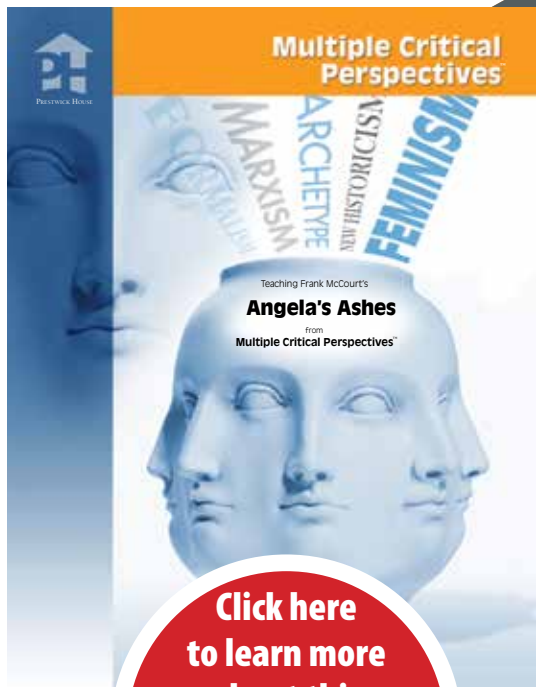




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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Frank McCourt's

Angela's Ashes

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

Rita Truschel



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General Introduction to the Work

Genre

ANGELA'S ASHES IS A MEMOIR, a form of autobiography focused on meaningful incidents within a related time span in a person's life.

Though *Angela's Ashes* is nonfiction, its narrative arc is similar to a Bildungsroman. This is a German term for a novel about the growth of the leading character's personality from youth to adulthood. Such stories also are called "coming-of-age" or "education" novels. The narrative follows the protagonist's intellectual, moral, and psychological development to maturity. Mistakes and challenges in pursuit of a goal form this person's identity or sense of self in relation to society.

Angela's Ashes is Frank McCourt's recollection of his desperately poor childhood during the Great Depression in Brooklyn, N.Y., and Ireland. He quit school at age 13. The book ends in 1949 with McCourt's return to New York at the age of 19, and his buoyant hope of a better life.

In reality, however, McCourt worked at menial jobs until he was drafted into the U.S. Army during the Korean war. After his military service, the G.I. Bill enabled him to attend New York University and graduate with his teaching credentials. He taught English and creative writing for almost 30 years in New York City high schools, where he told stories about his youth to connect with students.

All of the surviving McCourt brothers and their mother, Angela, eventually immigrated to the United States. McCourt's father never reunited with the family after his exit for England when Frank was 11, though he visited New York once late in life. After their mother's death, her sons took her ashes back to Limerick and left them on the burial plot of their twin brothers. That inspired the book's title, though the incident is not in the text.

McCourt wrote *Angela's Ashes* after he retired from teaching. The book became an immediate bestseller upon publication in 1996, when he was 66. It won the Pulitzer Prize for biography.

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. Since the 1980s, memoirs have been popular on the strength of emotional honesty and analysis about singular experiences, told in a dramatic narrative structure.

Autobiographical writers may incorporate feedback from family and friends, as well as journalistic research to add information, verify impressions, and widen perspective. Effective memoirs expand into larger themes of history, culture, gender, or spirituality.

New Historicism Applied to *Angela's Ashes*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Arab-Israeli story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.

Activity One

Examining political attitudes in *Angela's Ashes*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Political attitudes in *Angela's Ashes*.
2. Have students work individually, in pairs, or groups of three.
3. Have students follow the instructions on the handout.
4. Reconvene the class and discuss the students' responses. Students should cite examples from passages.
 - Does the author's style rely on certain rhetorical techniques more than others?
 - Does the author present conflict, contrasting views, or a uniform perspective?
 - What do techniques reveal about the author's attitude toward politics? National history? Heroism?

Psychoanalytic Approach Applied to *Angela's Ashes*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One**Character development in *Angela's Ashes***

1. Copy and distribute the worksheet: Examining character development in *Angela's Ashes*.
2. Have students work alone, with a partner, or in small groups to read the indicated passages and answer the questions on the handout.
3. Reconvene the class and allow students to share their responses to each passage.
4. After comparing all the episodes with each other, ask students to discuss whether McCourt changes as he gets older. If so, in what ways and why has he changed by the time he's 17? If not, why not? What clues suggest a lack of growth?
5. Finally, ask students to trace the development of the themes and motifs dealing with food and hunger. Cite narrative elements and literary techniques from each passage as evidence of consistency and differences.

Formalism Applied to *Angela's Ashes*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Charting the plotline of *Angela's Ashes*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Charting Frank McCourt's Plotline in *Angela's Ashes*.
2. Have students work individually, in pairs, or groups of three or four.
3. Have students follow the instructions on the Charting Frank McCourt's Plotline handout.
4. Reconvene the class after Part II has been completed. Allow groups to share the key events they have chosen and functions that they have identified for each event. Allow students to amend their own work as they choose.

NOTE: Students do not need to agree or come to consensus on the events chosen or their identified functions, but they should be able to explain their choices, and those choices must be based on an accurate understanding of the story and of the various elements of a plot structure (e.g., what is a climax?)

5. Have students return to their groups to complete Parts III and IV of the handout.
6. Reconvene the class and have students share their results.
7. Discuss any serious disagreements in students' account of the chronology or interpretation of narrative elements. Students do not need to agree about every episode, but it is important to correct any factual errors in understanding the time line.
8. Discuss the effect of recurring experiences in the memoir's plot.
 - What types of experience happen repeatedly?
 - In what ways are recurring incidents consistent in the text (attitude, diction, characterization, exposition, outcome)?
 - In what ways are recurring incidents different?
 - Is the timing of these experiences significant (character's age, motive, cause and effect)?
 - Does the climax result from a recurring experience?
 - How do recurring incidents affect your enjoyment of the plot? Does repetition have a purpose in the narrative (tension, suspense, contrast, empathy, emphasis, humor, satisfaction with the resolution)?
 - How do these recurring experiences affect your understanding of Frank McCourt's life story? What themes emerge from these incidents?