

# **Angela's Ashes Study Guide**

## **Angela's Ashes by Frank McCourt**

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# Plot Summary

Angela's Ashes is an autobiography written by the late Irish-American author Frank McCourt. The book is essentially the story of his life as a poverty-stricken boy growing up with a struggling mother, an alcoholic father, and a family of siblings, including three who die as infants.

McCourt begins the book by describing how his parents met in Brooklyn, New York, his mother, Angela, becoming pregnant with Frank. For that reason, she marries the father of her child, Malachy McCourt. For the next 20 years, Angela struggles to feed her family while Malachy, proud and often unemployed, drinks away his wages.

A series of tragedies befall the McCourts, including the death of Frank's baby sister, Margaret, and twin brothers Eugene and Oliver.

After the death of Margaret and Angela's ensuing depression, family members insist the McCourts return to Ireland, where they might find support from Angela's mother. But everyone in Ireland is poor, hunger is an ever-present theme, and the McCourts struggle even more in their home country.

Despite the family's struggles, Angela's Ashes is also a book filled with Irish humor, folklore and music. In spite of his struggles, Malachy is also a tender father who entertains Frank with Irish folktales and songs. Angela later gives birth to two more sons, Michael and Alphonsus.

At the age of 10, Frank makes his confirmation, then becomes ill with typhoid fever. During an extended stay in the hospital, he reads all kinds of books, including Shakespeare, which he loves.

When World War II breaks out, Malachy leaves for England to find a job, as did most of the men in Ireland, with the promise he would send money back to the family. But the promise never materializes and Frank must begin working odd jobs to help support the family. His jobs, for a variety of interesting individuals, instill confidence in the young man and he dreams of saving enough money to support the family and to leave Ireland for the United States.

But during this time, the family is evicted from their apartment and forced to move in with Angela's cousin Laman. Angry when he learns his mother is sleeping with Laman in return for his support, Frank becomes more eager to leave for the U.S. He also struggles with his own sexual feelings and the guilt instilled in him, as a Catholic schoolboy, about sex and masturbation.

In the final chapters of Angela's Ashes, Frank meets a young woman, Theresa Carmody, with whom he has a sexual relationship. But Theresa later dies of consumption, and a heartbroken Frank decides to save his money and leave for New

York City. Although he is saddened to leave his family, he looks forward to his future in the United States.



# Chapter 1-2

## Summary

Angela's Ashes opens with the author, Frank McCourt, describing his childhood as a "miserable Irish Catholic childhood," characterized by abject poverty, illness, and the alcoholism of his father, Malachy.

This chapter flashes back to describe the checkered history of Frank's parents.

Malachy grows up in northern Ireland and, while fighting for the old Irish Republican Army, commits an unspecified crime. A price is placed on his head for committing the crime, forcing him to leave Ireland for America. A big drinker already, Malachy is dismayed to learn about the Prohibition in America. But he eventually discovers underground "speakeasies," illegal drinking establishments. We also learn later in life, Malachy gives up drinking and "waits to die."

Frank's mother, Angela Sheehan, was born into the impoverished slums of Limerick. Her father, a drinker, once dropped her younger brother, Ab, on his head and injured him for life. After that incident, Angela's father left Ireland and she never saw him again.

As a young woman, Angela immigrated to America and lived with her cousins, the McNamara sisters. She eventually meets Malachy, recently out of prison on a theft charge, and she becomes pregnant out of wedlock. Her opinionated cousins, backed by their husbands, tell Malachy he must marry Angela.

They do marry, and Frank is born. One year later, Angela gives birth to a second son, Malachy, and two years after that, to twin sons, Eugene and Oliver. While living on Classon Avenue in Brooklyn, and with four young sons to care for, Angela gives birth to Margaret, the couple's only girl. During this time, Malachy stops drinking and becomes a doting father to Margaret. But because he loses his job, the family is desperate and starving.

Seven weeks after her birth, Margaret dies quietly in the family's apartment one night. Her death sends Angela into a depression, and the boys must fend for themselves. Malachy, who disappears for two days after the baby's death, begins drinking again. When neighbors realize the family is in dire straits, they contact Angela's cousins, who write a letter to Angela's mother, asking her to send money so the family can return to Ireland.

As the chapter ends, the family is aboard a steamer that is pulling out of New York Harbor. After pointing out the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island to her children, Angela leans over the side of the ship and vomits.

Chapter 2. The family arrives in Ireland, and goes first to Malachy's parents, who live in County Antrim. Malachy's father is welcoming, but his mother and sisters barely speak



to the family. Malachy's mother tells him that he won't be finding work in Ireland and that the older McCourts cannot provide hospitality to the family.

The McCourts take a bus to Dublin, where Malachy hopes to file a claim for an IRA pension. But he is turned away because the government has no record of his previous service. The family has to sleep that night in the local police station. The next morning, they learn the police officers had taken up a collection that would pay for train fare to Limerick for the McCourts.

In Limerick, Angela's hometown, the McCourts also feel unwelcome by Angela's family. Here, we meet Angela's mother, her sister Aggie, and Aggie's husband, Pa Keating. But Angela's mother helps the family find a furnished room, where all the McCourts must share one mattress, which they later discover is infested with fleas.

Less than a week after their arrival, Angela suffers a miscarriage. Malachy also learns his "dole," or unemployment insurance, will barely be enough to cover food for the family. Angela makes the first of many visits to the St. Vincent de Paul Society, which provides poor families with "dockets," coupons to be used for groceries and other necessities.

Oliver, only a year old, grows ill and is taken to the hospital. After staying with his Aunt Aggie and Uncle Pa, Frank learns Oliver has died. Later, at the burial services for Oliver, he becomes angry at the jackdaws hovering in the cemetery's trees and throws stones at the birds. Oliver's twin, Eugene, dies six months after his twin brother. Angela again spirals into a depression while Malachy gets drunk.

Angela embarrasses Malachy by accompanying him to the Labour Exchange, where he picks up his dole money. She takes the payment herself, then moves the family to a larger two-room flat on Hartstonge Street, close to Leamy's National School, where Frank and Malachy will attend classes. At first, Frank finds school difficult and the teachers frequently punish the boys with leather straps, canes and blackthorn sticks. When Frank is caught fighting with another students, the headmaster says, "It's not their fault that they're Yanks."

The family again deals with tragedy when Eugene dies of pneumonia six months after his twin brother died. Before the burial, Eugene's body is laid out on a bed in the family's home, and Frank is called upon to get his father from the pub. When he arrives, he sees that Malachy has placed his pint glass of beer on the tiny white coffin.

## Analysis

Throughout *Angela's Ashes*, three themes emerge: the hand-to-mouth existence of the McCourt family and many others living in Brooklyn and Ireland, the constant affliction of alcoholism of Frank's father Malachy, and the influence of the Roman Catholic church on Frank's life.



In the first chapters of the book, Frank narrates the story as a young boy, and through his naïve eyes, we experience his father's addiction and affection, his mother's sadness, and Frank's own dry sense of humor.

The story is interrupted by numerous Irish folk songs and legends, all imparted by Malachy and remembered vividly by Frank. Among those is the story of Cuchulain, considered one of the greatest heroes of Irish mythology and legend, and Frank wants his father to share the legend only with him. And when Malachy returns late at night from drinking, he often can be heard singing Irish Republican Army dirges that memorialize Irish rebels who fought the British, including Roddy McCorley of County Antrim, Malachy's home, who was executed by the British in 1800.

Malachy's alcoholism is a constant theme in these chapters and throughout the book. Drinking in Irish culture is almost an accepted norm, but Malachy cannot function or hold down a job because of his drinking, which leads to the family's unbearable poverty. For this reason as the oldest child, Angela often depends on Frank to care for the younger children, to look for food, and to retrieve his father. Even when, one by one, he loses three children, Malachy retreats to the local pubs.

## Vocabulary

Cacophony, loquacious, pious, catarrh, consumption, rickets, speakeasy, novena, pram, fortnight, atrocious, consecrated, dole, paraffin, cavorting, jackdaw, shilling, welt, asylum, porridge, ringworm, queue, IRA, Cossack, sauntering, scalding, sacrilege.



## Chapter 3-4

### Summary

Chapter 3. The McCourts move from their tiny one-room flat on Harstonge Street to a two-story house on Roden Lane. But they soon learn 11 families living on their street dump their bathroom waste into a lavatory directly next to the McCourts' home.

Because the family has lost two children in Ireland, their unemployment insurance is reduced by the Labour Exchange to 16 shillings a week, which will barely be enough to live on. Malachy looks for work in farms in the country, but uses his wages to drink.

Just before the Christmas holidays, the first floor of the family's home becomes flooded and all the furniture and their belongings must be moved upstairs. Angela and Malachy joke with the children about it, calling the first floor "Ireland" and the top floor "Italy."

In a stark scene, Frank and young Malachy accompany their mother to the butcher, where she hopes to buy meat for the holiday dinner. But all she can afford to purchase is a pig's head. During the walk back home, the boys are mocked by other children, who see them carrying the pig's head. Malachy Sr., too proud to beg for food, is embarrassed that his family was seen carrying the pig's head home.

Angela gives birth to a baby, Michael, who arrives home sick with a cold. When Michael stops breathing, Malachy Sr., saves him by sucking mucus out of his nose. When Frank and Malachy's shoes give out, their father mends the soles with pieces of an old tire. But when they wear the shoes to school the following day, the boys are mercilessly teased by their classmates.

Malachy lands a job at the Limerick cement factory, and the family once again holds out hope that their fortunes will finally change. But Angela and the children are disappointed when Malachy does not return home with his first paycheck. When he does finally return, the money spent on liquor, Frank and Malachy Jr. turn down their father's offer of a "Friday Penny" and Angela forces him to sleep on the first floor. In the morning, Malachy misses work and loses his new job.

Chapter 4. In this and many of the ensuing chapters, Frank introduces us to a series of his childhood friends in Limerick, and he continues to write about his education at Leamy's.

Like Frank, many of his classmates are poor. When Frank finds a raisin in his pastry at school one day, the boys beg him for the raisin, which is considered a rare treat, and Frank gives it to Paddy Clohessy, who is so poor he wears no shoes.

Preparing for his First Communion, Frank memorizes his catechism along with the other boys. But he juxtaposes that experience alongside a description of the boys sitting





under Limerick's streetlights, reading the books they love. When Frank worries he has committed sins, he prays to "the Angel on the Seventh Step" for forgiveness.

On the day of his First Communion, Frank arrives at the church late and has trouble swallowing the Communion wafer. After eating breakfast, he vomits in his grandmother's backyard and she takes him back to the church, convinced the boy must repent. But the priest tells Frank to simply wash away the mess he made. Because Frank was at the church, he missed his chance to collect money for his First Communion, which he had hoped to spend at the movies. Still, he manages to sneak into the movie theater while his friend, Mikey, distracts the ticket seller.

## Analysis

We see and learn much more about Malachy McCourt here, particularly in Chapter 3, where he is shown to be so proud he will not beg the butcher, he will not disguise his northern Ireland accent in order to get a job, and he will not help his family pick up bits of coal from the street in order to have a fire at home.

In an unusual departure from more naïve narration, Frank describes some of the men of Limerick, who do little more than collect the dole and sit around all day in front of their homes. At the same time, he describes the women, who clean, cook, care for their children, and live in poverty. We know Frank is describing his own mother and father, and for the first time, we sense his anger about his mother's suffering and his father's ill-conceived pride

When Malachy loses his job at the cement factory, Chapter 3 ends with this sentence: "He makes his way downstairs with the candle, sleeps on a chair, misses work in the morning, loses the job at the cement factory, and we're back on the dole again." We know Frank's innocent reverence for his father is now gone.

Chapter 4 is lighter than the book's previous chapters, focusing more on Frank's outside world, where he learns the catechism required to make his First Communion and forges friendships with other boys, some living in worse poverty than Frank.

Through Frank's eyes, we begin to see the heavy influence of the Catholic Church on his young life, complete with its formal rites, beliefs, superstitions and the guilt associated with it. Frank prays often to the "Angel on the Seventh Step", and describes "visits" from the angel that guides him to live a sin-free life.

When Frank finally makes his First Communion and receives the communion wafer, known among Catholics as "the body of Christ," the wafer becomes lodged on the roof of his mouth and he has difficulty dislodging and swallowing it. "I had God glued to the roof of my mouth," writes McCourt, showing us how influenced young Frank was by the church and its teachings. "Then he melted and I swallowed him."

The Irish Catholic guilt comes up again when Frank vomits in his grandmother's backyard. "I have God in me backyard," says his mortified grandmother before she drags Frank back to the confessional box to absolve himself of this latest sin.

## **Vocabulary**

Lavatory, slather, bog, diversion, affliction, martyr, bawl, catechism, ravenous, blaguard, galore, diversion, venial, poltroon.



## Chapter 5-6

### Summary

Chapter 5. Frank begins to notice the differences and resentments that exist not only in his immediate family, but in their Limerick neighborhood. He notes his mother doesn't speak to his grandmother, his grandmother doesn't speak to his father, and his mother doesn't speak to her siblings.

In the neighborhood, he notes Catholics don't speak to Protestants, especially those who converted out of starvation during the country's Famine. Those Protestants are known as "soupers." The worst Protestants, he says, are "the filthy informers."

Frank notes that his mother, distant with her own family, has a dramatically different relationship with a neighbor, Bridey Hannon. The two women love to talk, drinking tea and smoking cigarettes by the McCourt's fireplace. With Frank often listening in on their conversations, he hears his mother sing a song about a woman who marries "a man from the North," like Malachy. But she laughs ruefully whenever she sings these lines from the song:

And Limerick town has no happier hearth

Than mine has been with my man from the North.

When Angela decides Frank must take Irish dancing lessons, he skips his classes and uses the money his mother has given him to go to the movies with friends. His parents, however, learn about his deception when the dance teacher sends a note home, and Frank must confess his sins to the parish priest.

Chapter 6. Frank's fourth form teacher, Mr. O'Neill, gives his apple peel every day to any boy who answers a difficult question correctly in class. The boys, many of them poor and hungry, salivate at the thought of being able to enjoy a simple apple peel. Fintan Slattery, a boy Frank considers peculiar and feminine, earns the apple peel one day and shares it with Frank and his friends "Question" Quigley and Paddy Clohessy. Fintan invites Frank and Paddy to his house after school, promising to share milk and sandwiches with them. During their visit, Fintan follows each one of the boys to the bathroom and looks at them while they relieve themselves.

When Fintan once again invites the boys to his home, he eats his sandwich by himself and offers nothing to them. Because they're so hungry, Frank and Paddy skip the rest of school. They steal apples and milk from a nearby farm, milking the cows themselves. When Quigley tells Frank that his parents are looking for him, he worries about being punished and decides to stay overnight with Paddy at his home in Arthur's Key.

Paddy lives in deplorable conditions, and his father, Dennis, has the consumption. He lies in bed, waiting to die, coughing "ropes of green and yellow stuff" into a bucket.



The next morning, Frank's mother appears at the Clohessys' with the school guard and scolds Frank for not coming home. When Dennis Clohessy hears her voice, he invites her into the room and they reminisce about dancing together when they were young. Angela sings a folk song for him and cries when she leaves, forgetting how angry she was at Frank.

## Analysis

In these chapters, Frank is at once a growing, mischievous boy willing to break the rules, and a sensitive, curious youngster trying hard to understand the nuances of the life that surrounds him.

He notices his family's divisions, the coldness of his own grandmother, and the liberation Angela seems to feel in her long talks with her friend Bridey Hannon. He's puzzled when he hears Angela laugh during the song about the Irish girl who falls in love with "a man from the North." We know, and young Frank senses, that Angela lives an unfulfilled life.

Again, McCourt turns to his narrative of constant hunger – a condition that plagued his entire childhood. We see the boys in Frank's classroom salivate when Mr. O'Neill tempts them with just an apple peel. And when Frank and Paddy break the rules by skipping an afternoon of classes, they do so because they are hungry. After they steal apples from an orchard and drink the milk from cows in a field, McCourt writes, "I'm wondering why anyone should be hungry in a world full of milk and apples."

## Vocabulary

Abomination, chalice, coddle, banshee, gramophone, waddle, demolish, jig, souper, adenoids.



## Chapter 7-8

### Summary

Mickey Spellacy, one of Frank's school friends, gets one week off from school to grieve each of his brothers and sisters who die of consumption. Frank envies Mickey because he gets time off from school, along with money and sympathy. Mickey's sister, Brenda, is ill with the consumption in August, and Mickey asks Frank and Billy Campbell to pray that Brenda won't die until September, so Mickey can get time off from school. Mickey promises the boys that if they pray, he will invite them to Brenda's wake, where there will be food. Brenda dies during the school year, but when the boys show up for the wake, Mickey's mother slams the door in their faces. Frank feels vindicated the following year, however, when Mickey dies of consumption and doesn't get a week off from school.

Frank begins helping his Uncle Pat, also known as Ab Sheehan, deliver newspapers. On his rounds, Frank delivers the paper to Mr. Timoney, an elderly blind man who asks Frank to read to him on a regular basis. Frank enjoys reading to Mr. Timoney, who is intelligent, talks a lot about Buddhism, and speaks to Frank as if he is an adult. But just as they grow close, Mr. Timoney is taken to the City Home after his dog bites several people, including a nun, and a Catholic priest intervenes.

Angela gives birth to a boy, who the family names Alphonsus. When Grandpa sends a money order to the new baby, Angela asks Malachy to get the money order cashed, but sends Frank and Malachy Jr. to watch him. Malachy insists the boys go home after he cashes the money order, then walks into a pub.

Later, Angela sends boys back out to find their father, and during their search of the pubs, Frank steals fish and chips from a drunken man and feels guilty about committing a sin. He goes to confession and tells a priest he stole the food because his father was spending the family's food money on alcohol. The priest, moved by the confession, says he should be washing the feet of the people whose confessions he hears instead of handing out penances.

Chapter 8. Frank, now age 10, makes his Confirmation. But when he leaves the church, he gets a nosebleed and feels sick. A doctor who visits Frank at home tells his parents he has typhoid fever, and immediately carries him to his car and the hospital. Once there, Frank nearly dies, and is given Extreme Unction by a priest. Frank's father visits him and kisses him on the forehead, which makes Frank ecstatic.

During his four-month stay in the hospital, a girl named Patricia Madigan, who has diphtheria, is moved into the room next door. He never sees her, but they speak to each other through the walls and Patricia begins lending Frank books. A janitor named Seamus delivers the books to Frank, in spite of the fact the nurses and hospital nuns demand that the two children not speak to one another.



Patricia lends Frank a book about the history of England, and Frank reads his first lines of Shakespeare. Patricia also reads Alfred Noyes's poem "The Highwayman," to Frank, but never gets a chance to finish the poem when a nurse discovers that the two have been talking to each other. As a result, Frank is moved upstairs to an empty ward.

Frank later learns that Patricia died, and asks Seamus to find out what happens at the end of "The Highwayman." When Frank is finally released from the hospital, he learns he has to repeat the fifth form instead of moving up to sixth year with his friends. He says a prayer at the statue of St. Francis of Assisi to be moved ahead with his class, then writes an essay that so impresses his teacher that he is allowed to move up with the rest of his class.

## **Analysis**

Frank turns a corner when he meets Mr. Timoney, a free thinker who treats Frank like an equal. Mr. Timoney sees Frank is intelligent and urges him to open his mind to learning new things. Because Mr. Timoney is eccentric and opposes the Catholic church, he lives on the outskirts of Limerick society. When his dog bites three people, including a Catholic nun, he is committed to the County Home. We suspect the church had some hand in his committal.

At the same time, Frank experiences kindness of the church when he confesses he has stolen fish and chips from a drunken man. The priest says, "My child, I sit here. I hear the sins of the poor. I assign the penance. I bestow absolution. I should be on my knees washing their feet." This compassionate priest sees the despair of living in poverty, and refers to Jesus, who knelt to wash the feet of his apostles, when he hears Frank's confession.

We also begin to see the impact of literature and storytelling on Frank's life. He loses himself in stories and poetry, shared with Patricia Madigan, Mr. Timoney, and his own father. He discovers the beauty of Shakespeare, reads a history of England, immerses himself in the epic poem "The Highwayman," and continues to enjoy Malachy's storytelling each morning.

Frank feels badly when he hears that Patricia has died, but is more concerned about the fact she won't be able to finish reading "The Highwayman" to him. This reaction is typical of someone who has already experienced so much death in his own family and community.

## **Vocabulary**

Flail, gawking, typhoid, diphtheria, magistrate, blather, marmalade, lorry.



## Chapter 9-10

### Summary

Chapter 9. When World War II breaks out, families in Limerick send their fathers off to fight in England and begin to pull themselves out of poverty when the fathers send their pay home. Malachy leaves for England to find work, and Angela promises when his wages arrive, she will buy the boys one egg each on Sunday mornings. But once again, Malachy fails to send money home.

Frank gets conjunctivitis in his eyes, and has to be hospitalized. While at the hospital, he sees Seamus, the janitor, and Mr. Timoney, who has aged and lost his lively personality. But he tells Frank after his eyes are rested, he should “read till they fall out of your head.”

A desperate Angela goes to the Dispensary for public assistance, and is humiliated by an official who claims that her family does not deserve aid.

Chapter 10. The McCourt family experiences some of its most desperate hours, forced to move upstairs again to escape the cold and wet weather and trying to survive when Angela becomes sick. Frank steals food to feed his brothers, and the boys are forced to steal coal from other backyards so they can have heat.

When a truant officer visits to find out why the boys have not attended school, he tells Frank to get his Grandma and Aunt Aggie, who call for a doctor. Angela is diagnosed with pneumonia and admitted to the hospital. The boys all end up staying with Aunt Aggie, who hits and yells at the boys. Frank writes to Malachy, who returns to care for the boys until Angela gets well. But then Malachy once again leaves for England, effectively abandoning them under dire circumstances. When Angela has recovered, she must ask the Dispensary for money. Frank sees his mother begging, and feels ashamed of her and his family’s situation.

### Analysis

This section of the book brings into focus the class distinctions that separated rich from poor in Limerick, with Angela forced to reach out to the Dispensary for public assistance and humiliated by those in charge of providing charity to the poor. When Angela asks for public assistance, the men in charge tell her she doesn’t deserve the help because she was married to a man from “the North.”

When Angela becomes ill, it falls on Frank’s shoulders to feed his brothers and he must resort to stealing food and fuel from the wealthier people in town. His brother, Malachy, tells Frank he’s a lot like Robin Hood, who stole from the rich to feed the poor. Although Frank once was wracked by guilt for stealing, he now does it to survive. The truant



officer who checks on the boys' whereabouts points out Frank will make a good father. Ironically, he already is playing that role.

## Vocabulary

Conjunctivitis, munitions, trifle, lamentation, famished, tinker, damper, knackered, orphanage, squander.





# Chapter 11-12

## Summary

Chapter 11. Frank puts together a soccer team that includes his friends and Malachy Jr. While looking through an old trunk for his mother's red dress, which he intends to cut up and use to decorate the team uniforms, he discovers old papers including his parents' marriage certificate. It's here he learns he was born just six months after they were married. He asks his friend Mikey Molloy what it means, and Mikey tells him he was a bastard. Bastards spend eternity in Limbo, according to the church, and Frank is worried about his fate.

When the soccer team beats a group of wealthy boys and Frank makes the winning goal, he decided his soul, after all, will be saved.

Frank takes on a new job delivering coal to an ill neighbor, Mr. Hannon. Mr. Hannon becomes another father figure to Frank, treating him with kindness and urging him to leave Ireland for America when he is older. But Angela won't allow Frank to continue working for the Hannons after his eyes become seriously irritated by the coal dust. Mrs. Hannon later tells Frank he gave her husband "the feeling of a son." Hearing this, Frank cries.

Chapter 12. Malachy returns to Limerick for the Christmas holidays and gives the family a box of chocolates as a gift, with half of the chocolates already eaten. Although he promises Angela he will change, Malachy nevertheless leaves right after the Christmas dinner is over.

Frank begins dreaming about leaving Limerick for America, particularly after he befriends Mrs. Purcell, who invites him into her house to listen to Shakespearean plays and jazz music on her radio.

The family's situation becomes dire when Angela owes the landlord four weeks' back rent. Without heat, the family pulls apart one of their walls and uses it for firewood. One day, while Angela is out, the freezing boys cut into a support beam for the house and the roof starts to collapse. When the landlord arrives to fix the roof, he discovers the missing walls and evicts the family. A desperate Angela moves the boys to the home of her cousin, Laman Griffin, a sadistic man who forces Angela to clean his chamber pot regularly. When Grandma dies of pneumonia, Malachy Jr. decides to leave Limerick, and enrolls in the Army School of Music in Dublin.

## Analysis

Mr. Hannon is another father figure for Frank, who feels love for the elderly man and cries when he learns Mr. Hannon thinks of him as a son. Although Frank doesn't



understand the tears, we know he cries for the kindness of strangers, particularly men, because they are suitable substitutes for the absent, alcoholic Malachy.

In addition, Mr. Hannon provides Frank with the confidence and dreams he needs to escape from Limerick and poverty. He also says, "School, Frankie, school. The books, the books, the books."

Frank also begins to surrender to the fact his father will never change and provide the family with the support it so desperately needs. When he accompanies Angela to meet Malachy at the train station for the holidays, Frank says, "He's not coming, Ma'am. He doesn't care about us. He's just drunk over there in England." Malachy's behavior is no longer a surprise to Frank or his brothers.

## **Vocabulary**

Rugby, sizzle, doom, arrears, maggots, gallivanting.



# Chapter 13-14

## Summary

Chapter 13. Mr. O'Halloran, Frank's sixth form teacher, tells Angela that Frank is bright and should continue his schooling instead of going to work. But when she takes Frank to the Christian Brothers School to ask if they will accept him, a priest there tells Angela there is no room in the school for Frank and slams the door.

Mr. O'Halloran tells Frank he despises the class system in Ireland, which forces poor boys to work in menial jobs, regardless of their intelligence. Like Mr. Hannon, he tells Frank he should leave for America, where he will be treated fairly.

Frank is disgusted by the fact that his mother is sleeping with Laman Griffin, in return for having a roof over her head. When Frank forgets to empty Laman's chamber pot, they argue and Laman starts to beat Frank. Frank leaves, and moves in with Uncle Ab Sheehan.

Chapter 14. During this period of living basically alone, Frank spends a lot of time thinking about masturbation and feeling guilty about his feelings and actions. In the library, he finds a sex manual and learns about intercourse by reading it. He falls asleep in a park and when he awakes, he realizes he's had a wet dream in a public park and that people have seen him.

## Analysis

Both Angela and Mr. O'Halloran, a teacher Frank admires, express their disgust with Ireland's class system, and even with the church, when it becomes clear Frank will not be able to continue his studies. Frank listens to the adults as they rail against the forces that keep the poor in their place. Mr. O'Halloran says he is "disgusted by this free and independent Ireland that keeps a class system foisted on us by the English..."

When Angela and Frank are turned away by the Christian Brothers, she tells her son, "That's the second time a door was slammed in your face by the Church."

Frank is perhaps most disturbed during this period by the sexual relationship that has developed between Angela and Laman. And yet, Angela does not have the money for her own home and does the only thing she can do to save her children. When Laman assigns Frank the job of emptying his chamber pot, Angela "stares into the dead ashes in the fireplace." When he beats Frank, Angela screams, but sleeps with Laman later that same night.



## Vocabulary

Inviolate, sanitarium, gangrene, heathen, succumb, fester, perfidious, vile, obituary, squander, smidgen.



# Chapter 15-16

## Summary

Chapter 15. When Frank starts work at the post office as a telegram delivery boy, he brings a telegram to Paddy Clohessy's house. Their home has been transformed with new furniture, and Mrs. Clohessy tells Frank her husband recovered from his illness and went to England with Paddy to make money.

After Frank receives his first paycheck, he takes his brother Michael out to feast on fish and chips. Then the two of them see a movie. Although it makes Frank happy to treat his brother this way, he also vows to save his money to travel to America.

Frank has his first sexual relationship when he delivers a telegram one day to a home where Theresa Carmody, a rich girl suffering from consumption (now known as tuberculosis), lives. Frank frequently visits Theresa, and when she is feeling well enough, they make love. Theresa dies, and a heartbroken Frank worries she might be in hell because she had premarital sex with him, so he prays for her soul.

Chapter 16. Frank meets many characters while delivering telegrams, and makes extra money running errands for some of his older customers. An old woman named Brigid Finucane hires Frank to write threatening letters to people who owe her money, and Frank recognizes some of the debtors' names as friends and neighbors of the McCourts.

When Frank thinks about taking the exam that would land him a permanent job with the post office, Pa Keating convinces him taking such a job would be a dead end.

## Analysis

Frank makes several critical decisions here that will affect him for the rest of his life. He decides to save as much money as he can in his commitment to leave for America someday. He turns down the chance to take the post office exam, in spite of the disappointment and resentment of his boss, Mrs. O'Connell. Frank even puts aside his own feelings about writing letters to debtors, because he knows Mrs. Finucane will pay him for that distasteful job, bringing him that much closer to his dream of leaving Limerick.

Frank's growth as a man can also be seen in the relationship he has with Theresa Carmody, when they both cry during their first encounter. Their emotional lovemaking is fraught with Catholic guilt, sadness, sickness and adolescent longing.

Yet another father figure in Frank's life, Pa Keating, encourages him to reach for his dreams of leaving Limerick. "You'll be dead in your head before you're 30," says Pa



when Frank tells him about the post office exam. "Make up your own bloody mind and to hell with the safeshots and the begrudgers."

## Vocabulary

Quaff, reeking, abscess, ledger, pension, dint, perseverance, populace, assiduity.



# Chapter 17-19

## Summary

Chapter 17. When Frank is about to turn 16, Pa Keating takes him to the pub for his first pint, as is the custom in Ireland. While there, they discuss World War II and the sadness of Hitler's concentration camps. Frank, who gets drunk, starts a fight later with Angela about Laman Griffin, and slaps her "so the tears jump in her eyes and there's a small whimpering sound in her."

The next day, when a troubled Frank goes to the Franciscan church, a priest named Father Gregory asks Frank what is troubling him. Frank tells Father Gregory about his father, about hitting his mother, about Theresa, and about the unfairness of the concentration camps. Father Gregory tells Frank he should forgive himself, and reassures him that God has forgiven him and Theresa is in heaven.

Angela gets a job working in the home of a wealthy man, Mr. Sliney, and is happy working there.

Chapter 18. Frank delivers a Protestant newspaper for Easons Ltd., and continues writing letters for Mrs. Finucane. Just before Frank turns 19, Mrs. Finucane dies. Frank takes money from her purse and a trunk, then symbolically throws her ledger of debtors into the River Shannon. With that money, Frank books his trip to America.

For his remaining days in Ireland, Frank tries to memorize the places in Limerick and feels conflicted about leaving. On the night before he leaves, the family throws a going away party for Frank.

Frank's ship, the Irish Oak, arrives in Manhattan, which looks beautiful to Frank. The ship is rerouted first to Albany and then to Poughkeepsie, where Frank gets off the ship with a group of acquaintances and attends a party. They meet women at the party, and Frank has sex with one of the women. After they return to the Irish Oak, the wireless officer asks Frank, "Isn't this a great country altogether?"

Chapter 19. In answer to the officer's question, "Isn't this a great country altogether?" Frank answers, "'Tis." That is the only word uttered in Chapter 19.

## Analysis

When he goes to confession after slapping his mother, Frank despairs over the deaths of his sister and brothers, the abandonment of his father, his preoccupation with sex and masturbation, the poverty around him, and the inexplicable horror of the concentration camps. But in doing so, he lifts this enormous burden from his shoulders, with the help of Father Gregory. Here again, even though much of Frank's guilt and despair is aimed at the church, he is forgiven there for all his transgressions.



The anticipation Frank feels as he leaves for America is palpable, but we also know that he will forever be connected to Ireland.

The final chapter, "Tis", is McCourt's way of telling the reader how he feels about America and provides us with a sense of optimism as he heads into this new adventure.

## Vocabulary

Unbeknownst, Jesuit, ledger boomerangs.





# Characters

## Francis McCourt

The book's author and main character, Francis McCourt is a religious and intelligent boy who grows into a man as he struggles to overcome the hardship and hunger he experiences while living in Limerick, Ireland during the 1930s and 1940s.

## Malachy McCourt

Malachy McCourt is Frank's father, a proud Irishman raised in northern Ireland. His alcoholism and his inability to hold down a job is a constant theme in the book, but Malachy manages to earn affection from his children. Malachy is a tortured but sensitive man who fought for the Irish Republican Army and often returns home at night, drunk, getting his sons out of bed to join him in singing plaintive Irish battle songs.

## Angela Sheehan McCourt

Angela Sheehan McCourt is Frank's hardworking and long suffering mother, who endures miserable poverty and survives the loss of three children. Angela sets high standards for all of her children, but especially her eldest son, Frank. Although a religious woman, Angela is often angered by the double standards set by the wealthy Catholic church and the poor families of Limerick. Because of the family's poverty, she resorts to taking handouts and even begs for food for her family.

## Malachy Jr.

Malachy Jr. is Frank's younger brother, who provides much comic relief in the book. Malachy's charm and personality win over relatives and neighbors, whereas Frank is described by some as being dark and brooding, like his father.

## Oliver McCourt

Oliver McCourt is Frank's brother, twin to Eugene, who dies at an early age in Ireland.

## Eugene McCourt

Eugene McCourt is Frank's brother and Oliver's twin, who dies of pneumonia just six months after Oliver.



## Margaret McCourt

Margaret McCourt is Frank's only sister, who dies only seven weeks after her birth, while the family is living in Brooklyn. She was so loved by Malachy Sr. that he stopped drinking for a time after her birth. When Margaret dies, a depressed Angela leaves her sons to fend for themselves.

## Aunt Aggie

Aunt Aggie is Frank's childless aunt, who is jealous of Angela's big family. Although cantankerous, Aggie helps the McCourts when they need it.

## Uncle Pa Keating

Married to Aunt Aggie, Pa Keating is warm and caring toward the McCourt boys. He encourages the adolescent Frank to follow his dreams.

## Uncle Pat Sheehan

Uncle Pat Sheehan is Angela's brother, whose real name is Ab, whose drunk father dropped him on his head and damaged his brain when he was young. When he's older, Frank moves in with Uncle Pat after fighting with his mother and Laman Griffin.

## Mr. Timoney

Mr. Timoney is an intelligent, eccentric elderly man who has lost his eyesight and pays Frank to read books to him. Mr. Timoney becomes a close friend, treating Frank like an adult and sharing his beliefs in Buddhism and his criticism of the Catholic church.

## Grandma

Grandma is Angela's tough mother and Frank's grandmother. She sends the McCourts money to come to Ireland, but has a strained relationship with her daughter and is critical of Malachy because of his northern Ireland roots. Grandma also is religious and superstitious, and claims Frank inherited his father's "odd manner."

## Patricia Madigan

Patricia Madigan is a 14-year-old diphtheria patient whose room is next door to Frank's when he is hospitalized with typhoid. She lends books to Frank and reads poetry to him, until he is moved to another floor in the hospital. He learns later she died at the hospital.



## **Paddy Clohessy**

Paddy Clobessy is Frank's classmate, who shares pranks with him and with whom he cuts class. When Frank stays at Paddy's house one night, he realizes how desperately poor Paddy's family is, living in squalor and with a father who is dying of consumption.

## **Fintan Slattery**

Fintan Slattery is an effeminate classmate of Frank's who invites Frank and Paddy over for lunch and watches them when they use the bathroom.

## **Theresa Carmody**

Theresa Carmody is a 17-year-old girl who has a sexual relationship with Frank while she is sick with consumption. When she dies, Frank worries about her soul, because she has had premarital sex with him.

## **Mickey Spellacy**

Mickey Spellacy is a friend of Frank's whose siblings all begin to die of consumption. When Mickey's sister is expected to die, Mickey asks Frank to pray that she stays alive until the school year, so Mickey can get a week off from school. A year later, Mickey himself dies from the consumption.



# Objects/Places

## Limerick

Limerick is the cold wet city in Ireland where Frank spent his formative years.

## The River Shannon

Frank and others, including Malachy, associate the River Shannon, the central waterway in Limerick, with the cold and wet that plague his family and others living in poverty. The McCourts' home is frequently flooded by the rains in Limerick, and they must move all their belongings to their upstairs room, which they call "Italy." They call the downstairs room "Ireland." At the end of the book, the River Shannon symbolizes Frank's escape from Ireland by ship, and he throws Mrs. Finucane's ledger of debts into the river to free his neighbors from what they once owed the woman.

## Leamy's National School

The school Frank and his brothers attended in Limerick.

## Ashes

The ashes in the book's title are referenced frequently, when the downtrodden Angela smokes Woodbine cigarettes as a way to cope with her unfulfilled life. She also sits by the fireplace to smoke – a fireplace that is often nothing but smoldering ashes.

## The Catholic Church

Frank spends much of his life in the Catholic church, especially to say confession for the sins he's committed.

## Eggs

Eggs are frequently mentioned in the memoir, as a luxury that the McCourts cannot afford. Each time that Angela believes Malachy will bring home his salary, she promises her sons they will feast on eggs.

## St. Vincent de Paul Society

A charitable organization that provides poor families with "dockets," coupons that can be used to purchase food.



# Themes

## Hunger

The hunger experienced by Frank, his family and many of his childhood friends and neighbors is palpable in this book. Frank is constantly in search of food, both for himself and for his siblings, and they all at one time or another are forced to steal and beg for anything to eat. On the holidays, they eat the heads of animals – the only part cheap enough to buy from the butcher.

Everywhere in the book, we are reminded of how destitute and hungry the McCourt family is. When Frank's teacher offers an apple peel to the class, the boys salivate at the thought. When Frank and Paddy skip school, they pick apples and milks cows to satiate themselves. And Frank's constant state of hunger is a symbol of the hunger of Ireland, long suffering after the potato famine of the 1800s that wiped out entire populations of the country.

## Alcoholism

Malachy deals with his demons by drinking, and his disease is the ruination of the McCourts. Because he drinks away his wages, and even the unemployment insurance money, he leaves his family destitute. At the same time, the pub is an escape for many of the Irish, and Malachy is even enabled by those around him. When his children die, he receives sympathy and free drinks in the pub.

To ease the suffering he'll experience, Grandma says Shee a drink will ease his pain and suffering.

## Catholicism

The Catholic church plays a major role in the book and has an unending influence on Frank's life. Like many of his young friends, Frank fears the church and feels extreme guilt about his actions. He prays often to "the Angel on the Seventh Step" and St. Francis of Assisi, and is often disappointed by his own beliefs and by the church. He feels the sting of rejection when he is turned away from the Christian Brothers school, and when he is not allowed to become an altar boy after memorizing the entire Latin mass. But Frank never fully rejects the church, where he also was treated kindly by priests like Father Gregory and others.

## Death and Illness

Like hunger, death and illness is a constant in Frank's young life, beginning with the death of his infant sister Margaret, and his twin brothers, Eugene and Oliver. As Frank



grows older, he becomes so accustomed to the deaths of friends and relatives that his reactions almost seem callous.

When Patricia Madigan dies of diphtheria, he cares mostly about the poem she never finished reading to him. And when school chum Mickey Spellacy dies of consumption, along with most of his siblings, Frank's feeling of vindication when Mickey doesn't get yet another week off from school is almost shocking.

# Style

## Point of View

As a memoir, *Angela's Ashes* is told from the first-person point of view of Francis McCourt. His point of view gradually becomes more adult as he grows from a child to a young man in the story.

## Setting

The setting is primarily Limerick, Ireland, where Frank spent most of his childhood and adolescence. The first chapter of *Angela's Ashes* takes place in Brooklyn, NY, where Frank was born.

## Language and Meaning

Much of the language in *Angela's Ashes* is colorful, sprinkled with Irish colloquialisms and some vulgarities, and McCourt uses no quotation marks when he quotes the people in his life. Words like "arse" and "eegit" and "och" appear frequently in the text.

## Structure

This memoir is told in chronological order, beginning with Frank's earliest memories and ending with his trip to America. The story is divided into 19 chapters, with the final chapter containing just one word: 'Tis.



## Quotes

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. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood. (Chapter 1)

I think my father is like the Holy Trinity with three people in him, the one in the morning with the paper, the one at night with the stories and the prayers, and then the one who does the bad thing and comes home with the smell of whiskey and wants us to die for Ireland. (Chapter 8)

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been a minute since my last confession. (Chapter 4)

My heart is banging away in my chest and I don't know what to do because I know I'm raging inside like my mother by the fire and all I can think of doing is running in and giving him a good kick in the leg and running out again but I don't because we have the mornings by the fire when he tells me about Cuchulain and DeValera and Roosevelt and if he's there drunk and buying pints with the baby's money he has that look in his eyes Eugene had when he searched for Oliver and I might as well go home and tell my mother a lie that I never saw him couldn't find him. (Chapter 7)

Mam turns toward the dead ashes in the fire and sucks at the last bit of goodness in the Woodbine butt caught between the brown thumb and the burnt middle finger. Michael who is only five and won't understand anything till he's eleven like me wants to know if we're having fish and chips tonight because he's hungry. Mam says, Next week, love, and he goes back out to play in the lane. (Chapter 9)

You'll marry a Brigid and have five little Catholics and grow little roses in your garden. You'll be dead in your head before you're thirty and dried in your ballocks the years before. Make up your own bloody mind and to hell with the safeshots and the begrudgers. (Chapter 16)

Frost is already whitening the fresh earth on the grave and I think of Theresa cold in the coffin, the red hair, the green eyes. I can't understand the feelings going through me but I know that with all the people who died in my family and all the people who died in the lanes around me and all the people who left, I never had a pain like this in my heart and I hope I never will again. (Chapter 15)





# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

What kind of influence did the Catholic church have on Frank, Angela and Grandma? In what ways did each of them view the church and its rules and rites?

## Topic 2

By the end of Angela's Ashes, how does Frank feel about his father?

## Topic 3

Identify the men in Frank's life who served as father figures to him, and explain why he admired them.

## Topic 4

Explain the feelings that both Frank and Theresa Carmody experienced the first time they had sex.