

Angela's Ashes



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRANK MCCOURT

Frank McCourt was born to an impoverished Irish family living in New York City in the Great Depression. He and his family then moved back to Ireland when McCourt was nine, and he lived there for the next ten years—his first novel, *Angela's Ashes*, details his early life in both America and Ireland. Several of his siblings died at an early age, and Frank was forced to work hard as a young boy to support those who remained alive. At the age of nineteen, McCourt moved back to New York, and in 1951, he volunteered to fight in the Korean War. He was able to attend New York University on the GI Bill, and graduated with an undergraduate degree in English. Afterwards, he began a long career teaching in New York public schools. In 1996, he succeeded in publishing the memoir he'd been working on for years, *Angela's Ashes*. The book was a surprise bestseller, and won McCourt the Pulitzer Prize for Biography or Autobiography. Afterwards, McCourt published two other memoirs, *Tis* (1999) and *Teacher Man* (2005). He died of cancer in 2009.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The most important historical event to understand while reading *Angela's Ashes* is the conflict between Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, and between Ireland and England. For centuries, Ireland had been politically, economically, and culturally subordinate to England: England was a site of trade with the rest of Europe, the home of the monarchy, etc. Beginning with the reign of Henry VIII in the 1500s, England became a Protestant nation, while Ireland remained predominately Catholic. The divide between England and Ireland became significantly greater during the 19th century, when England became a major imperial power and Ireland continued to suffer from enormous poverty. A milestone in Irish-English relations then occurred in 1916, at a time when England was engaged in World War I (Ireland was neutral during this conflict). Taking advantage of England's weakened state, Catholic nationalists in Ireland staged the famous Easter Rising, as a result of which Ireland declared itself an independent republic. But the new Irish Republic faced a challenge: while the majority of Ireland supported independence, a minority of Irish people, mostly Protestant and based mostly in the North, supported continued relations with England. The tension between the Protestant North and the Republic in the South persists to the present day. At the time when *Angela's Ashes* is set, Northern Irish men couldn't find work in the South, and vice versa. Other important historical

events in the memoir include the Great Depression. In 1929, the economies of most Western countries experienced a crisis. Due to a variety of factors, including aggressive investing, reckless banking practices, and excessive borrowing, the stock market crashed, leaving the average person with little to no savings or disposable income. With businesses going broke, work was scarce. In Europe, where the unemployment rate was often higher than 30 percent, many people chose to immigrate to the United States, where work was scarce but still easier to come by. Ironically, the McCourt family chooses to move *back* to Ireland from the United States in the midst of the Great Depression.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In interview, McCourt has stated that James Joyce's 1916 novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was an important influence on *Angela's Ashes*. Like McCourt's memoir, Joyce's novel details the coming-of-age of a young, poor Irish boy in semi-autobiographical detail. (Mccourt's decision to print the dialogue in his novel without quotation marks is an explicit homage to *Portrait*.) Another important work of literature in *Angela's Ashes*, mentioned explicitly at several points, is the "Saga of Cuchulain." Cuchulain is a legendary Irish hero, renowned for his feats of strength and bravery. Although for many centuries there was a strong oral tradition centered around Cuchulain's legend, there was a notable revival of interest in Cuchulain stories beginning in the early 20th century. Lady Gregory, the Irish poet and writer, devoted many years to compiling stories into the collection *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, one of the most popular Irish books of the time (it would have been familiar even to the McCourts). Finally, McCourt mentions Jonathan Swift's infamous short essay, "A Modest Proposal," written in 1729. In this satirical work, Swift sarcastically suggests that England force the Irish to eat their own children, thereby getting rid of the famine and overpopulation problems. Despite the savageness of Swift's satire, many readers of the essay thought that Swift was being serious!

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir*
- **Where Written:** New York City, USA
- **When Published:** September 5, 1996
- **Literary Period:** "Miserabilism," the immigrant memoir
- **Genre:** Memoir, coming-of-age story
- **Setting:** Brooklyn, New York / Limerick, Ireland
- **Climax:** Frank's decision to walk out of the post office exam

- **Antagonist:** Lamar Griffin, poverty, alcoholism
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

From dropout to honorary professor: Frank McCourt's academic career was a strange thing. As a 13-year-old, he was forced to drop out of school to support his family, meaning that he couldn't pursue the secondary education that most Americans take for granted. Years later, however, McCourt had more degrees than he could count. On the strength of *Angela's Ashes*, he was granted honorary degrees from the University of Western Ontario, New York University, and at least a dozen other schools.

A Limerick Hero: After Frank McCourt's death in 2009, his brother Malachy arranged for the building of a Frank McCourt Museum in Limerick, Ireland. The Museum, which officially opened in 2011, contains McCourt's papers, some of his old schoolbooks and photographs, and a recreation of the McCourt home as it stood in the 1940s. Not a bad way to remember your brother.



PLOT SUMMARY

In the 1920s, Malachy McCourt, a Northern Irish Brooklyn resident, meets Angela Sheehan, who's from Limerick, Ireland. They have sex, and Angela becomes pregnant—as a result, Angela's strict Catholic family forces Malachy to marry Angela. Their child, Frank McCourt, is the narrator of the book.

Frank grows up in Brooklyn. When he's a small child, his parents give birth to a boy, Malachy Jr., as well as twins, Oliver and Eugene. Frank takes care of his younger brothers, keeping them company and playing with them while his parents try to find work. Life is very hard for the McCourts—there's not enough food to go around, and often Malachy (Sr.) is too interested in drinking to keep a reliable job. Despite his alcoholism, Malachy Sr. is often a loving father to Frank, and tells him wonderful stories about Irish heroes of the past. Around the beginning of the Great Depression, Angela gives birth to a daughter, Margaret, who dies shortly thereafter. Angela is devastated. Afterwards, Malachy Sr. begins drinking more and more, essentially taking food out of his children's mouths. Angela's cousins, Delia Fortune and Philomena Flynn, arrange for her family to travel back to Ireland, where there might be more work for Malachy Sr.

The McCourts sail to Ireland, where they settle in Limerick. There, Angela's mother, Margaret Sheehan, provides Angela and Malachy Sr. with food and shelter. Margaret despises Malachy Sr. for being a Northerner and a bad husband. In the coming weeks, Malachy Sr. looks for work, but whenever he finds a job, he spends his wages on huge amounts of beer.

Sometimes, he comes home late at night, drunkenly singing, and wakes Frank and his siblings up by telling them to swear to “die for Ireland.” Angela supports her family by accepting money from her mother and going to local charities such as the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. Meanwhile, Frank's younger brother Oliver dies of the cold. Angela in particular is devastated by this news—for days, she can barely move. Eugene, Oliver's twin, becomes quiet and sad, no matter how hard Frank tries to cheer him up. Malachy Sr. responds to Oliver's death by drinking more than ever. Shortly after Oliver's death, Frank begins going to the local Limerick school, where he begins to learn math, Irish history, and the tenets of Catholicism. With a year, Angela gives birth to a new child, Michael McCourt. Shortly afterwards, Eugene dies.

At the age of 7, Frank is preparing for his First Communion, an important Catholic ceremony. On the day of his communion, Frank is so nervous that he vomits after taking communion, angering Margaret. Around this time, Frank befriends a local boy named Mikey Molloy who never took communion (and therefore never became a Catholic) because of his muscle spasms. Mikey has a carefree attitude—he says that it doesn't matter if he sins, since he's going to hell anyway. Frank enters the 4th form in school, where he learns about mathematics and befriends other students, such as Brendan Quigley and Paddy Clohessy. Frank also begins earning money by reading books to an elderly man, Mr. Timoney. Shortly after Frank begins working, Angela gives birth to another child, Alphonsus Joseph, or Alphie. Although Angela's family sends extra money to take care of the new baby, Malachy Sr. spends most of the money on beer.

At the age of 10, Frank prepares for his confirmation—the day when he goes to confession for the first time. He confesses minor sins to the priest, but soon afterwards, he develops a horrible fever. Frank ends up spending the next four months in the Limerick hospital, being treated for typhoid. In the hospital, Frank reads about the history of English kings and makes friends with a young girl named Patricia Madigan, who's also being treated for serious illness. In the end, Patricia dies while Frank survives and is released from the hospital.

In the early 1940s, Frank enters the 6th form, where he studies with an eccentric, charismatic teacher, Thomas L. O'Halloran. O'Halloran teaches Frank that the history of Ireland is full of bloodshed and tragedy, and stresses that the Irish were cruel aggressors as well as victims. Frank is a bright student, and earns praise from his teachers. Meanwhile, Angela and Malachy Sr. argue about their future together. Angela refuses to have any more children—and since she's a Catholic (and can't use any kind of birth control), this means not having sex with her husband anymore. Partly for this reason, and partly because it's rumored that there's more work available abroad, Malachy Sr. leaves Limerick for England. He promises to send his family money from his job, but after he leaves money rarely comes.

Ironically, Malachy Sr.'s new employment makes life harder for Angela and her family, since now Angela is forbidden from claiming unemployment benefits.

Angela becomes deliriously sick, and is sent to the hospital. In the meantime, Frank and his siblings go to live with their Aunt Aggie, Angela's sister. Aggie is a sharp, cruel woman, and she frequently accuses Frank of being lazy and useless. Aggie's husband, Pa Keating, is kinder, though he drinks too much. With Keating's direction, Frank sends a letter to Malachy Sr., explaining Angela's suffering. Malachy Sr. comes home to visit Angela while she's in the hospital. He leaves shortly after she's released, swearing that he'll send money more regularly. However, after he leaves for England he stops sending telegrams or money, and it's rumored that he's found a new woman.

At the age of 12, Frank begins working for an old man named Mr. Hannon. He delivers bags of coal, a job that pays well but weakens his already bad eyes. At the end of the year, Malachy Sr. comes home for Christmas. He claims that he's a new man. By this point, Frank has begun to despise his father for taking the money that should go to feed Frank's siblings. Sure enough, Malachy Sr. drinks heavily while he's home, and he leaves the day after Christmas, never to return.

Angela and her family are evicted from their home. They go to stay with Angela's cousin, Gerard "Laman" Griffin. Frank realizes that Laman is a cruel, violent bully. He also becomes aware that Angela and Laman are sleeping together. One evening, Frank and Laman have a loud argument, and Laman hits him in the face. Furious, Frank goes to stay with his uncle, Ab Sheehan. Frank also begins to discover his own sexuality. He masturbates frequently, always feeling guilty for doing so. In church and school, he's told that sexuality is a wicked, sinful thing.

At the age of 14, Frank gets a job delivering telegrams to Limerick families. He becomes well acquainted with the city, and begins earning money of his own, most of which he gives to Angela and his siblings. Because Frank is still staying with Ab Sheehan, his brother Michael comes to visit him often. After a few months of this, Michael is living with Frank at Ab Sheehan's, and soon afterwards, Angela begins living there, too.

One day, when he's 15, Frank delivers a telegram to the house of the wealthy Carmody family. A young, pretty girl, Theresa Carmody, greets him and invites him inside. Although Frank knows Theresa to have consumption (tuberculosis), he agrees. Inside, Theresa kisses Frank, and they have sex—both losing their virginity in the process. Frank continues delivering telegrams to Theresa, having sex with her each time. A few weeks later, Frank is shocked to learn that Theresa has died of consumption. He's terrified that by sinning with Theresa, he's condemned Theresa to spend an eternity in hell.

When he's 16, Frank takes a job delivering newspapers with a

man named Mr. McCaffrey. For the next 2 years, he works for McCaffrey while also writing letters for an elderly woman named Mrs. Finucane. Frank improves his reading and writing skills in this time, and dreams of one day being able to go to **America**. He also confesses his sins with Theresa to a priest. The priest assures Frank that Theresa must have repented her sins before dying, meaning that she's gone to heaven.

When he's almost 19 years old, Frank goes to work at Mrs. Finucane's house as usual. There, he's surprised to find that his employer has died. Without thinking, Frank searches Finucane's house for money and takes it for himself. He now has enough money to afford a ticket to America.

Frank buys his ticket and tells his family that he's headed to America. The night before he leaves, his family throws him a party, attended by all his uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents. The next day, Frank leaves for America, confident that he'll find more happiness and freedom there. Shortly after he lands in America, he has sex with a prostitute. He concludes that America is "a great country altogether."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Frank McCourt – The narrator and protagonist of *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt is sometimes a witness and sometimes an active participant in the misery of life in Limerick, Ireland. From an early age, he's conscious of being extremely poor and physically uncomfortable. As he grows older, Frank also becomes aware that a major cause of his suffering is the fact that his alcoholic father, Malachy McCourt Sr., spends his wages on beer instead of using it to buy food for his children. Frank faces strong social pressures to conform to the norms of life in Ireland: he's taught to believe in the tenets of Catholicism, to hate the English, and to be fiercely loyal to his family. And yet Frank nurtures doubts about his life in Limerick—instead of embracing his religion and family wholeheartedly, he dreams of moving to **America** and starting a new life. As the memoir draws to a close, Frank turns his back on the small-mindedness and pettiness of life in Ireland—although he's tried to find a place for himself in Limerick, he concludes that it's better to start fresh in a new country. Frank also seems to distance himself from his religious beliefs—indeed, the first thing he does after arriving in America is to have sex with a woman who is married (and may possibly be a prostitute), Frieda.

Malachy McCourt Sr. – Malachy McCourt Sr. is an alcoholic, underachieving man, who goes through life without finding success of any kind. He comes to marry Angela Sheehan after having sex with her at a party. Angela discovers that she's pregnant, and her strict Catholic cousins force Malachy to marry her to avoid a scandal. Malachy Sr. goes on to have many

other children with Angela—since they're both Catholic, they don't use birth control. Faced with the challenge of finding work that can provide for his large family, Malachy Sr. turns to drinking, squandering what little money he has instead of using it to buy food. As Frank McCourt grows older, he comes to see his father for what he truly is: a lazy, incompetent alcoholic. And yet Frank isn't entirely unsympathetic to Malachy Sr. It is Malachy Sr. who first instills in Frank a fondness for storytelling—the same fondness that one day leads Frank to write the memoir itself. And Malachy Sr.'s inability to find a job isn't entirely his fault. Because he was born in Northern Ireland, he's despised in Limerick, where the people regard the Northern Irish as a dangerous clan of England-lovers.

Angela Sheehan McCourt – The titular character of *Angela's Ashes*, and the matriarch of the McCourt family, Angela Sheehan McCourt, more than anyone else in the memoir, is responsible for helping Frank McCourt survive his impoverished childhood. As the mother of Frank and his siblings, Angela works tirelessly to provide money and food for them, sometimes working jobs but more often begging the Saint Vincent de Paul Society and other charities for food and shelter. Taking care of Frank and her other children is often a struggle for Angela, and not only because money is scarce—she also has to grapple with her alcoholic husband, Malachy McCourt Sr., who usually spends whatever money is available on beer. It's tempting to conclude that Frank isn't very close with his mother—certainly, there aren't many moments of warmth between them, and in the second half of the memoir, they barely speak to one another. And yet Angela, more than anyone else, is the reason Frank survived growing up in Limerick, a fact that's confirmed by Frank's decision to put her name in the title of his book. (It's often asked why McCourt chose to title his book *Angela's Ashes*, since Angela doesn't die at the end of the book. McCourt's explanation is that he'd planned to write a much longer book, culminating in the death of his mother. Although McCourt shortened his memoir to only cover his time in Ireland, he liked the sound of the title so much that he kept it.)

Margaret Sheehan – The old, severe mother of Angela McCourt, and Frank McCourt's grandmother, Margaret Sheehan plays an important role in Frank's growth and development. It is Margaret who first arranges for Angela and Malachy Sr. to travel from Brooklyn to Limerick, bringing Frank and his siblings along. Although Margaret despises Malachy Sr. for being lazy, drunk, and a Northerner, she gives Angela's family food, money, and shelter long after they've settled in Limerick. One could say that Margaret Sheehan is the embodiment of Limerick itself: she's strict, she's cold, and she's fiercely religious (and has no patience for Frank when he's reluctant to embrace Catholicism), but she's also extremely loyal to her family.

Malachy McCourt Jr. – The younger brother of Frank McCourt

(and the sibling who's closest in age to Frank), Malachy McCourt Jr. is a somewhat nebulous presence in *Angela's Ashes*. While he's not particularly close to Frank, the brothers get along well, looking out for each other and sharing food and money with each other whenever possible. Malachy Jr. shares Frank's ambitions of leaving Ireland one day—indeed, he leaves the country several times, once to join the army, once to work at a private school. Although Frank considers waiting another year before leaving for **America** so that Malachy Jr. can go with him, he eventually decides to travel alone, leaving Malachy Jr.'s fate unclear.

Gerard "Laman" Griffin – A cousin of Angela Sheehan McCourt, Laman Griffin is a charismatic yet unpredictable man. After Angela and her family move in with Laman, Frank McCourt begins to like Laman, admiring his fondness for reading and music. But as time goes on, Frank begins to see that Laman is actually a violent alcoholic. As a result, Frank leaves Laman's house and never comes back. It's suggested that another factor in Frank's decision to leave Laman's house is his discovery that Laman and his mother are sleeping together.

Michael McCourt – Frank McCourt's younger brother. While Frank isn't particularly close with Michael McCourt—indeed, he pities Michael for being too young to spend time with him and too old to spend time with Alphie, the baby of the family—Frank generously gives Michael money and food during his time working for the Limerick telegram office.

Theresa Carmody – A young, pretty Limerick girl who's suffering from consumption (tuberculosis), Theresa Carmody loses her virginity to Frank McCourt, just as Frank loses his virginity to her. Theresa's sudden death from tuberculosis shortly after having had sex with Frank is one of the key events of the second half of the memoir—her death terrifies Frank, since he assumes that he's condemned her to an eternity in hell.

Nora Molloy – An old friend of Angela McCourt's, who lives in Limerick. Nora Molloy is close friends with Angela, and it's suggested that they've bonded because of the similarities between their husbands, both of whom are alcoholics. Nora is also the mother of Mikey Molloy, an important influence on Frank McCourt's development.

Mikey Molloy – A Limerick teenager—a couple years older than Frank McCourt—who represents an important influence on Frank's development. Although raised in a Catholic community, Mikey Molloy is never officially made a Catholic: he can't take communion because of his uncontrollable muscle spasms. Mikey celebrates his "outsiderness" in Limerick—he's fond of telling Frank that he's not a "real Catholic," and can therefore do whatever he wants. Mikey's intelligence and jaunty acceptance of his own differences make him something of a role model for the young, impressionable Frank.

Aunt Aggie – The maternal aunt of Frank McCourt, Aunt Aggie is a strict, severe woman who frequently criticizes Frank and

his siblings for being sinful, lazy, etc. Nevertheless, she helps Angela Sheehan McCourt, her sister, to take care of her offspring, giving them food and shelter when Malachy Sr. has spent all his money.

Pa Keating – The kind, likable husband of Aunt Aggie, Pa Keating is, like Malachy McCourt Sr., a heavy drinker and a gifted storyteller. As several points in the memoir, he comforts Frank McCourt when Frank is feeling sad, and as the story goes on it's clear that Pa Keating is an important influence on Frank's sense of hopefulness, as well as his flair for telling a good tale.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Oliver McCourt – Frank McCourt's younger brother, and the twin of Eugene McCourt. Oliver McCourt dies at a young age, devastating Angela McCourt.

Eugene McCourt – Frank McCourt's younger brother, and the twin of Oliver McCourt. Eugene McCourt dies at a young age, shortly after the death of his twin.

Margaret McCourt – Frank McCourt's younger sister, who dies while she's still a baby.

Patrick Sheehan / Uncle Pat – The brother of Angela Sheehan McCourt, Patrick Sheehan is a feeble-minded man who works in the Limerick post office.

Delia Fortune – Angela McCourt's cousin, who despises Malachy McCourt Sr., and is instrumental in arranging for Angela and her family to travel from New York back to Limerick.

Philomena Flynn – Angela McCourt's cousin, who despises Malachy McCourt Sr., and is instrumental in arranging for Angela and her family to travel from New York back to Limerick.

Freddie Leibowitz – A young boy who lives in the same building as Frank McCourt while the McCourts live in Brooklyn.

Minnie MacAdorey – A good-hearted neighbor of the McCourts during their time in Brooklyn, Minnie MacAdorey often takes care of Frank and his siblings while Angela and Malachy Sr. are busy.

Mrs. Leibowitz – The mother of Freddie Leibowitz, Mrs. Leibowitz is a generous, warm woman who feeds Frank McCourt when he's hungry.

Mr. Dimino – The local Italian grocer in Frank McCourt's Brooklyn neighborhood. He gives the McCourts free bags of food on more than one occasion.

Angela Dimino – Mr. Dimino's wife.

Mr. Quinlivan – The head of the Limerick Quaker church.

Peter Molloy – The irresponsible, alcoholic husband of Nora Molloy.

Mr. O'Dea – The schoolmaster at the Limerick school that

Frank McCourt attends until the age of 14.

Benson – A schoolteacher at the Limerick school that Frank McCourt attends until the age of 14.

Bill Galvin – A young, decent man who rents a room in Margaret Sheehan's house.

Brendan Quigley – A classmate of Frank McCourt.

Fintan Slattery – A generous classmate of Frank McCourt.

Paddy Clohessy – A school friend of Frank McCourt, who eventually leaves Limerick to go to England.

Dennis Clohessy – A middle-aged man who knew Angela Sheehan McCourt when they were much younger, and—it's implied—loved her.

Mrs. Clohessy – The wife of Dennis Clohessy, and the mother of Paddy Clohessy.

Mickey Spellacy – A friend of Frank McCourt.

Mr. Timoney – An elderly, eccentric man. Frank McCourt reads to him.

Declan Collopy – A large, bullying boy, with whom Frank McCourt has a fight.

Alphonsus Joseph "Alphie" McCourt – Frank McCourt's youngest brother, and the baby of the family.

Peter Dooley – A shy, hunchbacked classmate of Frank McCourt, who makes extra money for himself by letting his classmates pay to see his sisters lying naked in their rooms.

Patricia Madigan – A young, kind-hearted girl who befriends Frank McCourt while they're both in the hospital. She eventually dies of illness.

Seamus – A janitor in the Limerick hospital, who looks after Frank McCourt while he's being treated for typhoid fever.

Thomas L. O'Halloran – An eccentric, knowledgeable schoolteacher who encourages Frank McCourt and his peers to contemplate the world.

Mr. Coffey – An official at the Limerick Dispensary Office, who reluctantly agrees to provide Angela Sheehan McCourt with charity.

Mr. Kane – An official at the Limerick Dispensary Office, who reluctantly agrees to provide Angela Sheehan McCourt with charity.

Dennehy – A Limerick police officer.

Mr. Hannon – An aging man who hires Frank McCourt to carry heavy bags of coal around Limerick, since he's too weak to do so himself.

Mrs. Hannon – The wife of Mr. Hannon.

Ab Sheehan – A jovial uncle of Frank McCourt, who allows Frank to live with him after Frank walks out of Laman Griffin's house.

Mrs. O'Connell – A stern, humorless woman who works at the telegram office.

Mrs. Spillane – A poor Limerick woman with two small daughters.

Mrs. Harrington – The wife of Mr. Harrington, who dies of tuberculosis.

Mr. Harrington – A bigoted Englishman living in Limerick, Mr. Harrington nearly costs Frank McCourt his job when he spitefully accuses Frank of stealing his food and alcohol.

Mrs. Finucane – An elderly woman who sells overpriced dresses to the people of Limerick.

Mr. McCaffrey – A newspaper seller and distributor who hires Frank McCourt.

Father Gregory – The local priest who hears Frank McCourt confess to having had sex with Theresa Carmody, and reassures him that Theresa has gone to heaven.

Gerry Halvey – A messenger boy for Mr. McCaffrey.

Eamon – A delivery boy for Mr. McCaffrey.

Peter – A delivery boy for Mr. McCaffrey.

Mr. Sliney – An elderly man who pays Angela McCourt to take care of him.

Stephen Carey – A priest who tells Frank McCourt that he'll never be allowed to be an altar boy.

Miss Barry – A cold, humorless woman who works at the Limerick telegram office.

President Franklin Roosevelt – President of the United States during the Great Depression and World War II, praised for his commitment to protecting **America** and providing employment for all citizens.

Jonathan Swift – Renowned Irish author who wrote such classic novels as *Gulliver's Travels*, as well as the satirical short story "A Modest Proposal," in which he sarcastically proposed that England end the Irish famine by encouraging Irish families to eat their own children.

Tim Boyle – A priest who greets Frank McCourt in **America**.

Frieda – A married woman with whom Frank McCourt has sex shortly after landing in **America**.

Grandpa McCourt – Malachy McCourt Sr.'s father.

Mr. Heggarty – An ex-IRA (Irish Republican Army) official who fought for Irish independence, but refuses to help Malachy McCourt Sr. find work.

Mr. O'Neill – An eccentric teacher at Frank McCourt's school, who urges the students to study math.

Toby Mackey – A telegram boy who aspires to travel to America one day.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



IRISH SOCIAL TENSIONS

As Frank McCourt portrays it, his family's life in Ireland is dominated by the longstanding tensions between England and Ireland, between

Protestantism and Catholicism, between Ireland's North and the South, and between the wealthy and the poor. These constant tensions deeply affect Frank's life as he grows up, and also shape the way he views the world. For example, from an early age, Frank is taught to despise the Northern Irish, most of whom are Protestants—even though Frank himself has family from the North. This is a clear sign of the prejudices he faces within his community and of his outsider status among his supposed peers.

The tensions that McCourt portrays in his memoir stretch back hundreds of years, arguably beginning when England became a Protestant nation in the early 1500s. In the following centuries, as England became a major imperial power and Ireland remained impoverished, the hatred between the two countries escalated. England was criticized for doing nothing to prevent the legendary Irish Potato Famine of the 19th century and for imposing strict and unfair taxes on Irish land. The political tension between wealthy, powerful England and impoverished Ireland then manifested itself in the religious conflict between Protestant and Catholic Irish families. From the perspective of Irish Catholics, Irish Protestants were little better than the English. There was also a strong class element in the Catholic-Protestant divide in Ireland: because Catholicism forbids birth control, Catholic families tended to be larger, and therefore poorer. Over time, the ideological, political, and cultural divide in Ireland became a physical divide as well. After 1916, Ireland was split between a large Catholic population in the South and a smaller, predominately Protestant population that was fairly loyal to England in the North. (For more information on this subject, see Background Info.)

The fierce rivalry between different kinds of Irish people is apparent in every aspect of Frank McCourt's childhood. His father, Malachy Sr., can't get a job in Limerick, partly because he's a lazy alcoholic, but also because he's from Northern Ireland. Ironically, the fact that Malachy Sr. is actually a Catholic makes no difference in Limerick. The fact that he's from the North—the *symbol* of Protestantism, England, and imperialist aggression—is enough to make him despised. Frank also slowly realizes that his family is poor partly because his Catholic

parents are forbidden from using any kind of birth control. As the book moves along, the McCourts gain new children which they're financial incapable of supporting. The few Protestant families Frank knows are wealthier and more powerful, in no small part because they have fewer mouths to feed.

As Frank grows up, he feels himself being pulled in a specific direction regarding all these tensions: towards Catholicism, Southern Irish life, and poverty. Because everyone else in his life is Catholic and fiercely anti-English, he's expected to be, as well. By trial and error, Frank learns an important lesson about social rivalries: the only kind of person more despised than an enemy is a defector. Essentially, he must choose a side in these social tensions, or else be scorned as an outsider. When Frank refuses to join a Catholic boy's group, for instance, his coworkers and friends shun him. To live in Limerick is to be Catholic and anti-English: by refusing to go along with the rest of the group in even the smallest of ways, Frank makes himself an outsider, no better—in fact, worse—than a Northern Protestant.

In spite of the tremendous social pressure to conform and choose sides in the social tensions of Irish life, Frank is naturally drawn to outsiders—those like his friend, Mikey, who refuse to go along with the group, or even those like his father, who couldn't go along with the group even if they wanted to. In the end, Frank refuses to build his life around the religious and social tensions of Ireland and leaves the country altogether, becoming an outsider himself.



POVERTY, SURVIVAL, AND MORALITY

Frank McCourt grows up in a family so large and poorly taken care of that he and his siblings often go days without food, and poverty is a huge part of his experience growing up. Because Frank's father, Malachy Sr., is too drunk and lazy to get a reliable job, the McCourts turn to other methods for making money and surviving. In the course of their struggle to make ends meet, they're forced to confront many moral and practical challenges.

One of the most important sources of money and food for the McCourt family is the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, a charity organization that (even today) provides food, shelter, and money for the poor. Angela McCourt, Frank's mother, goes to the de Paul Society and explains that she's the mother of many children, without any source of income. In response, she's provided with furniture, food, and other goods. It's important to note that Angela doesn't feel—or at least display—any guilt about relying on other people to survive. At the end of the day, dignity is less important than survival: Angela will take money from anyone kind enough to provide it, in the interest of feeding her children.

As the memoir goes on, the characters go to greater lengths in the interest of survival, sacrificing conventional definitions of

right and wrong. At many points, Frank steals food and money from other people—sometimes people with whom his family is friendly. (He even steals money from a dead woman, which he uses to feed his family and to travel to **America**.) Much like his mother, Frank seems to feel almost no shame for his actions. While he confesses most of his crimes to a priest, he doesn't continue to think about these crimes afterwards (as he does in the case of his sexual encounter with Theresa Carmody). For Frank, no less than for his mother, survival outweighs the moral rules against theft—in short, he steals first and confesses later.

And yet it would be a mistake to say that the characters in the memoir have no moral code simply because they're starving. On the contrary, the characters work hard, take care of loved ones, and, at their worst, commit crimes that are essentially victimless. As a child, Frank shares stolen food with his brothers, and furthermore, the "victims" of his thefts are mostly prosperous storeowners or wealthy families. Even Frank's greatest crime, the theft of more than 50 pounds, is clearly his most harmless, since the only conceivable victim is a woman who's already dead. In Frank's mind, there is more dignity—perhaps even more morality—in theft than in begging. Begging leaves Frank symbolically or literally reliant on other people, but by stealing, on the other hand, Frank gains a measure of independence for himself, and is able to pursue his own freedom and happiness in America.

In church, Frank and the other characters of *Angela's Ashes* are taught to obey the rules of Catholicism. But in the course of their day-to-day lives, they're faced with the far more difficult choice between doing the "right" thing and surviving. Instead of obeying an unwavering Catholic moral code, Frank—because of his extreme poverty—must navigate his way through ethical challenges for which there's no obvious solution. In the process, he develops his own unique worldview, protecting his interests while also working hard and protecting others.



CATHOLICISM, SEXUALITY, AND COMING-OF-AGE

Catholicism is a source of enormous social and political conflict in Ireland, but as a personal religious faith, it's also the moral standard against which Frank McCourt measures himself. Throughout *Angela's Ashes*, Frank comes of age by coming to terms with his Catholic education—deciding which parts of the religion he believes in, and which parts he rejects altogether. In short, Catholicism shapes the external reality of Frank's life, but also affects his inner life and the decisions he makes.

From early on in the memoir, McCourt makes it clear that Catholicism shapes Frank's understanding of his community and his self. Children become Catholics—which in Limerick just means true human beings—when they go through the ceremony of confirmation and confession. Confirmation Day is

an important ritual for Frank and his peers. For the first time in his life, Frank must confess his sins—the most personal part of his life—to a priest. This suggests that Frank is becoming more mature; he’s being pushed to contemplate his own actions and think about doing the right thing. Moreover, just as the confirmation process gives Frank a sense of his own “inner life”—his thoughts, feelings, and sins—it also pushes Frank to realize that his peers have inner lives, too. Shortly after being confirmed, Frank strikes up a friendship with Mikey Molloy, an intelligent, thoughtful boy who was never confirmed because of his uncontrollable muscle spasms. Mikey’s indifference to Catholicism inspires Frank to question his own religion. Yet the thoughtfulness, introspection, and doubt that Frank applies to Catholicism are *itself* part of the Catholic process of becoming a mature, thinking man. Paradoxically, Catholicism teaches Frank how to doubt Catholicism itself.

Catholicism also shapes Frank’s understanding of sexuality, one of the most important aspects of his coming-of-age. In Catholicism, masturbation and sexual desire outside of marriage are considered sinful. Frank finds this extremely difficult to believe, especially because he often has sexual dreams—he can’t accept that it’s a sin to dream about anything. Yet in spite of his skepticism, Frank subscribes to the Catholic view of sex as original sin, as evidenced by his brief affair with Theresa Carmody, the teenaged girl to whom Frank loses his virginity. When Theresa dies shortly after having sex with Frank, Frank is terrified that she’ll be punished for her sins forever—he blames himself for damning his friend to hell. Religion has shaped Frank’s worldview to the point where he hates himself for disobeying its rules. Even if he has objections to Catholicism, he still calls himself a Catholic.

As McCourt depicts it, the process of becoming a man in Limerick is a process of learning about Catholicism, becoming a Catholic, and then grappling with its teachings. Frank is hardly alone in his sense of guilt and sexual confusion—we get the sense that every person in Limerick has gone through the same things Frank is going through. The majority of people in Limerick resolve their confusion by ultimately accepting Catholicism in their lives, but Frank does not. He leaves Ireland, arrives in New York, and promptly has sex with a young prostitute—a sure sign that Frank has replaced the tenets of Catholicism with his own freedom and curiosity. In all, Catholicism is an inescapable part of life in Limerick—until the characters of *Angela’s Ashes* have either embraced or moved past their religion, they haven’t truly become adults.



FAMILY

Although the characters of *Angela’s Ashes* are poor and desperate, they’re surprisingly helpful and generous with each other. When Malachy Sr. and Angela McCourt are struggling to make ends meet, they’re often able to survive by turning to members of their extended

family for help. In Ireland, where work and food are scarce, the family bond is exceptionally strong—a guarantee that, if there is any food, money, or shelter to be had, it will be divided fairly among the owner’s kin.

It’s surprising that families are so loyal in Limerick, for the simple reason that they’re extremely large. Because of the dictates of Catholicism, mothers and fathers have a large number of children, and as a result, Frank McCourt has a great number of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Due to the large size of the average family in Limerick, family loyalties are always based on proximity; in other words, while family members are loyal to one another, they’re *most* loyal and attentive to the nuclear family first, and uncles, aunts, and cousins second. The paramount example of loyalty to one’s nuclear family is Angela McCourt, who works hard every day to collect enough money to buy food to feed her large, hungry family. For the majority of the memoir, Angela has no job—her primary motive is her loyalty to and compassion for her children. Angela’s husband, Malachy Sr., embodies the opposite ethos: he’s lazy, and often seems indifferent to his wife and children. Malachy Sr.’s example is the exception that proves the rule, however—he’s portrayed as a pathetic, immature man, and no small part of his immaturity stems from his refusal to respect one of the most important parts of adult life, loyalty to one’s family.

Even if people in Limerick reserve their greatest loyalty for their immediate families, the family bond is so powerful that the McCourts often rely on their extended families for help as well. Frank’s survival from childhood to the age of 19 is the result of countless uncles, aunts, grandparents, and distant cousins, who give him food, employment, and shelter, even though they barely know him at all. Even more strangely, the family members who help Frank the most are sometimes people like his Aunt Aggie, who know him and actively dislike him—criticize him for being lazy, being the son of a Northern Irishman, etc. The most important implication of this is that the family bond isn’t based on reason or affection. Not only is there no practical reason for Aunt Aggie to help Frank; there seems to be no sentimental reason for her to do so, either. In short, family is a reason all to itself.



MISERY, DRUNKENNESS, AND ESCAPE

For the characters in *Angela’s Ashes*, life is—to use McCourt’s own word—miserable. The characters are often too poor to feed themselves, their children and loved ones die of horrible diseases, and there’s a general sense that their lives will never get any better. Why don’t the people of Limerick collapse in despair? How do they find happiness in their miserable lives?

The single most common way that people in *Angela’s Ashes* cope with sadness is drinking. Almost all the men in the book, and some of the women, too, frequent the pubs of Limerick late at

night, spending their wages on pints of beer. Alcohol is an important way to cope with misery because it allows the drinker to retreat into nostalgia or sentimentality and forget about the present. Drinking at a pub, we see again and again, is a way to escape into the past, where things seem simpler and better. Even Malachy Sr., who's often thrown out of the pubs where he drinks, likes to come home drunk and force his children to swear that they'd die for Ireland—a patriotic, even nostalgic gesture that distracts Malachy Sr. from the harsh reality that he's currently unemployed and half-starved. The problem with drinking away one's sorrows, of course, is that it's a vicious cycle. Drinking doesn't just relieve sadness; it *creates* new sadness, since drinking heavily means spending most of one's money, and therefore remaining poor. Alcohol is also a depressant, meaning that Malachy Sr.'s drinking may make him feel happy in the short term, but ultimately it only makes him more depressed and more likely to drink again.

Another common way for the people of Limerick to relieve their suffering is escapism, particularly through religion and the idea of heaven. Catholicism teaches that those who lead good, pious lives will be rewarded in heaven forever. There are many times when a character in the book loses a loved one, and the character's only relief is the belief that the loved one is "in a better place now." If there's a flaw in this way of coping with tragedy, it's that religion encourages people to accept their misery instead of trying to get rid of it or better their situations. In general, the characters in *Angela's Ashes* turn to various forms of "escapism" to cope with tragedy: instead of trying to fight tragedy, they try to forget about it. Even Frank adopts his own form of escapism by going to watch movies at the cinema when he's had a troubling experience.

Although Frank indulges in his own forms of escapism, he also refuses to accept the state of constant misery in his own life and instead works to change things. The movies Frank sees at the cinema are almost always from **America**, an early sign that Frank aspires to travel to the United States one day, and—more abstractly—that Frank wants to improve his situation instead of quietly accepting it as inevitable. Through hope, ambition, and hard work, Frank manages to save enough money to pay for a ticket to America, where (as the last word of the book suggests), he's happier. As the book draws to a close, we realize that Frank has refused to drown his sorrows in religion, alcohol, or escapism (as most everyone in Limerick does)—instead he's faced his misery head-on, and fought it off.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



AMERICA

Frank McCourt is born in America, and then spends most of his early adulthood in Ireland trying to find a way to go back. As he remembers it, America—represented by Brooklyn, where he grew up—is an intimidating, poverty-stricken place. And yet America is also a land of opportunity, where it's easier to find work than it is in Ireland, and where it's possible to escape the suffocating judgment and social pressure that Frank experiences in Ireland. Ultimately, America symbolizes Frank McCourt's ambitions, and his dreams of a better life for himself.



ECLIPSE

The night before Frank McCourt is due to travel to **America**, he sees a lunar eclipse outside his house. For some, the eclipse is a sign of Frank's good fortune—for others, though, it's a sign that his journey to America will be cursed. In the end, then, the eclipse isn't a symbol of good or bad fortune—rather, it's a symbol of the uncertainty in Frank's life, an uncertainty that's intimidating at times, but also exhilarating.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *Angela's Ashes* published in 1999.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years.

Related Characters: Frank McCourt (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Frank offers a quick "preview" of the story he's about to tell us: a tour of his miserable childhood growing up in a poor Catholic family in Ireland. He lists some of the characters who made his life so miserable, such as teachers, priests, and alcoholic family members (and soon enough, he'll name and further characterize them).

Frank's tone here lies somewhere between regret and boastfulness. He's clearly saddened by many of the things he experienced as a young boy, and has been deeply affected by his painful childhood. And yet Frank is also curiously proud of his Irish Catholic upbringing: in a strange display of machismo, he contrasts his own childhood with other people's, arguing that he's been through more pain and sadness than anyone he knows (and, perhaps, is tougher and stronger as a result). The quotation is also slightly humorous, despite the misery it describes (something typical of McCourt's style). Frank has been through a lot, but now that he's a fully-grown author, he looks back on his past with a hint of amusement.

☛ The minute she losses one child there is another one on the way. We don't know how she does it. She's married four years, five children and another on the way. That shows you what can happen when you marry someone from the North for they have no control over themselves up there a bunch of Protestands that they are. He goes out for work every day but we know he spends all his time in the saloons and gets a few dollars for sweeping floors and lifting barrels and spends the money right back on the drink. It's terrible, Aunt Margaret, and we all think Angela and the children would be better off in her native land. We don't have the money to buy the tickets ourselves for times is hard but you might be able to see your way. Hopping this finds you in fine form as it leaves us thank God and His Blessed Mother.

Related Characters: Delia Fortune, Philomena Flynn (speaker), Malachy McCourt Sr., Margaret Sheehan, Angela Sheehan McCourt

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Angela's cousins, Delia and Philomena, write a letter to Angela's mother, Margaret, who lives in Ireland. They use the letter as an opportunity to air their grievances with regard to Angela's husband, Malachy Sr. Malachy Sr. is a drunken, lazy man—but even worse (in Delia and Philomena's eyes), he's from Northern Ireland, the part of the country that's usually associated with British culture and Protestantism—everything that Angela's Catholic family despises.


The quotation is important because it also establishes a hierarchy of loyalty—family comes even before religion and nationality. In spite of Delia and Philomena's hatred for

Malachy Sr., they know that Angela is bound to stay married to him forever (due to her strong Catholic convictions), so Malachy is family now. As a result, Delia and Philomena feel a sense of duty to take care of Malachy Sr. and his children (including Frank), and ask Margaret for her help in bringing the family to Ireland. Delia and Philomena seem not to have much affection for Angela or Malachy; rather, they're acting out of a strong sense of obligation to "blood."

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ A man with a pink patch on his eye tells us we're on the right street, Charlie Heggarty lives at number fourteen, God blast him. The man tells Dad, I can see you're a man that did his bit. Dad says, Och, I did my bit, and the man says, I did me bit, too, and what did it get me but one eye less and a pension that wouldn't feed a canary. But Ireland is free, says Dad, and that's a grand thing.

Related Characters: Mr. Heggarty, Malachy McCourt Sr., Frank McCourt (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51-52

Explanation and Analysis



In this quotation, Malachy Sr. crosses paths for a former IRA official—someone who fought for Irish independence in the 1910s. The IRA was successful in achieving independence for Southern Ireland, but when Ireland was granted independence, it struggled to take care of itself. The quotation exposes some of the problems that arose after the 1910s: there were still massive problems of hunger and unemployment afflicting the country. Worse, people who'd done their "bit" (i.e., sacrificed their health and happiness to fight for Ireland) often found themselves wounded, alone, and unemployed—without reward for their service.

The irony of this quotation is clear: all the "grandness" of Irish independence doesn't amount to anything if people can't feed their families. As we'll quickly see, Malachy Sr., as an irresponsible alcoholic, focuses on the abstract glory of his country as a way of dodging responsibility for taking care of his children—but also as a way of finding hope and meaning in his rather depressing existence. We'll also see that Malachy, while lazy and ultra-patriotic, is hardly the exception among Irishmen: the Irish are an incredibly proud, patriotic people, even when patriotism gets in the way of their happiness.

Grandma whispers to Aunt Aggie, Who'll put the child in the coffin? and Aunt Aggie whispers, I won't. That's the job for the mother.

Uncle Pat hears them. I'll put the child in the coffin, he says. He limps to the bed and places his arms around Mam's shoulders. She looks up at him and her face is drenched. He says, I'll put the child in the coffin, Angela.

Related Characters: Patrick Sheehan / Uncle Pat, Aunt Aggie, Margaret Sheehan (speaker), Angela Sheehan McCourt, Oliver McCourt

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

After the death of her child Oliver (Frank's little brother), Angela and the rest of the family attends the funeral. Angela, it's agreed, has a responsibility: bury her child in a coffin. Angela finds herself unable to perform this task, however, as she's too miserable. And yet Angela at least *recognizes* that she has a duty to place Oliver in the coffin. Her grief and misery contrasts markedly with her husband Malachy Sr.'s drunkenness during the even. Whereas Malachy Sr. escapes or represses his grief with drinking, Angela faces her feelings head-on, painful though this is.

The quotation also demonstrates the power of family in Ireland. When a family member is too weak or sad to perform a duty, it's the responsibility of someone else in the family (here, Uncle Pat) to carry it out. Not for the last time in the novel, another Sheehan will give aid and comfort to Angela and her children.

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

As Frank adjusts to his life in Ireland, he becomes increasingly familiar with the staples of Irish culture—most importantly, the Catholic church. In this quotation, Frank (who's still a little boy) tries to understand Christianity. Because he's witnessed the deaths of no less than two of his own young brothers, Frank naturally assumes that Jesus (the "baby in the crib") is dead, too. Frank's reaction to the sight of the baby Jesus demonstrates how important religion is for the miserable families of Ireland: when tragedy strikes, people turn to Christianity to come to terms with the tragedy (just as Frank does, albeit in a very crude way). And yet Christianity also seems to be an *extension* of the misery of life in Ireland, not an escape from it. The sight of Jesus fully grown, on the cross, terrifies the young Frank. It's key to note that Frank can't understand how baby Jesus turns into adult Jesus—by the same token, he can't understand how he, a young boy, will ever "turn into" a fully-grown man. Manhood seems so far away, and death is such a constant part of his life, that growing up seems impossible.

Dad stands for a minute, swaying, and puts the penny back in his pocket. He turns toward Mam and she says, You're not sleeping in this bed tonight. 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.

Related Characters: Frank McCourt, Angela Sheehan McCourt (speaker), Malachy McCourt Sr.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Malachy Sr. tries to turn a new leaf by getting a job at a cement factory. He attempts to drink less, but fails miserably: he comes back to his home late at night, extremely drunk. Angela's behavior toward her husband shows that she knows full-well the harm he's doing to his family: because he's blowing through so much money on alcohol, his children are literally starving. And yet Angela is powerless to do much about her husband's drinking problem. She can be angry with him, but she can't stop him from spending the money he earns on beer.

At this early point in the novel, we're still getting a feel for

Chapter 3 Quotes

Easter is better than Christmas because Dad takes us to the Redemptorist church where all the priests wear white and sing. They're happy because Our Lord is in heaven. I ask Dad if the baby in the crib is dead and he says, No, He was thirty-three when He died and there He is, hanging on the cross. I don't understand how He grew up so fast that He's hanging there with a hat made of thorns and blood everywhere, dripping from His head, His hands, His feet, and a big hole near His belly.

Related Characters: Malachy McCourt Sr., Frank McCourt (speaker)

Related Themes: 

the pattern of Malachy's drinking: every so often, he resolves to stop drinking, gets a job, then starts drinking again and loses his job. Because the novel is told from a child's point of view, McCourt doesn't offer any judgment for his father's behavior. Interestingly, the absence of any big statement about Malachy Sr.'s selfishness makes Malachy's behavior seem even more despicable.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ The priest tells Mrs. Molloy not to worry. God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform and surely He has a special purpose for Mikey, fits and all. She says, Isn't it remarkable he can swally all kinds of sweets and buns but if he has to swally the body of Our Lord he goes into a fit? Isn't that remarkable? She worries Mikey might have the fit and die and go to hell if he has any class of a sin on his soul though everyone knows he's an angel out of heaven. Mikey tells her God is not going to afflict you with the fit and then boot you into hell on top of it. What kind of a God would do a thing like that?

Related Characters: Nora Molloy, Mikey Molloy (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Frank introduces us to Mikey Molloy, a young boy who's alienated from his peers because of his violent epileptic fits. Mikey is unable to take communion—a staple of Irish Catholic life—because of the supposed danger that he could have a fit and choke to death on the body of Christ. While technically Mikey's inability to take communion means that he's not a full Catholic, and therefore damned, Mikey insists that he'll be fine—surely no God would send him to hell for something he has no control over.

Mikey is one of the most interesting characters in *Angela's Ashes*, because he seems especially wise (in a childlike way) when it comes to Catholicism. Mikey can see, very clearly, that it would be wrong for God to send him to Hell simply because he was born with fits—Mikey seems to have a childlike faith in right and wrong, and a justice that extends beyond arbitrary rules. His view of Catholicism avoids the complex tangle of rules and regulations that many of the adults in the community get lost in.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ Dad holds my hand going through the streets and people look at us because of the way we're saying Latin back and forth. He knocks at the sacristy door and tells Stephen Carey, This is my son, Frank, who knows the Latin and is ready to be an altar boy.

Stephen Carey looks at him, then me. He says, We don't have room for him, and closes the door.

Dad is still holding my hand and squeezes till it hurts and I want to cry out.

He says nothing on the way home. He takes off his cap, sits by the fire and lights a Woodbine. Mam is smoking, too. Well, she says, is he going to be an altar boy?

There's no room for him.

Related Characters: Stephen Carey, Malachy McCourt Sr. (speaker), Frank McCourt

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Malachy Sr. takes Frank to one of the local Catholic schools—one of the best schools in the area—and tries to obtain a place for Frank. By this time, Frank has shown aptitude as a writer and a thinker; he'd probably make an excellent student. And yet Frank is turned away from the school without any explanation beyond "We don't have room."

While McCourt never explicitly says so, it's strongly implied that Frank is turned away because of his father's unpopularity. Malachy is well-known to be a North Irishman; in spite of his proven commitment to the IRA, Irish independence, and Catholicism, nothing he does can change the fact that he's an outsider. As a result, Malachy is treated like a second-class citizen, and his children, by extension, aren't offered a good education. Malachy is a lazy, loutish man, but it's possible to feel some sympathy for him: even if Malachy were a responsible father, he'd still be treated like an enemy (and it's also probable that this treatment contributes to the alcoholic behavior that makes him a bad father).

Chapter 7 Quotes

☞☞ I'm hungry but I'm afraid to go home till I find my father. He's not in Naughton's fish and chip shop but there's a drunken man asleep at a table in the corner and his fish and chips are on the floor in their Limerick Leader wrapping and if I don't get them the cat will so I shove them under my jersey and I'm out the door and up the street to sit on the steps at the railway station eat my fish and chips watch the drunken soldiers pass by with the girls that giggle thank the drunken man in my mind for drowning the fish and chips in vinegar and smothering them in salt and then remember that if I die tonight I'm in a state of sin for stealing and I could go straight to hell stuffed with fish and chips but it's Saturday and if the priests are still in the confession boxes I can clear my soul after my feed.

Related Characters: Frank McCourt (speaker), Malachy McCourt Sr.

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Frank steals some food from a passed out drunken man, and then struggles with his Catholic sense of guilt. The scene suggests that Frank adopts something like a "shoot first, ask questions later" attitude toward sinning: he doesn't make a point of sinning, but when his need is great enough, he'll sin, reasoning that he can always repent later on.

In general, the quotation dramatizes the way that Irish youths must learn to navigate their ways through poverty and religion. As a boy who never has enough food, Frank is often put in a position where he *has* to sin to save his own life: there are times when he has to steal food or risk starving to death. But by this point, Frank is a practicing Catholic—he has plenty of doubts about the religion, but he still goes to confession and attends church on Sundays. Frank has the strong sense that he's doing something wrong by eating the food in this scene—according to the Catholic rules he's been taught, he could be risking going to hell forever. And yet because his hunger is more pressing than his faith in this particular moment, he takes the risk.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞☞ I know when Dad does the bad thing. I know when he drinks the dole money and Mam is desperate and has to beg at the St. Vincent de Paul Society and ask for credit at Kathleen O'Connell's shop but I don't want to back away from him and run to Mam. How can I do that when I'm up with him early every morning with the whole world asleep? He lights the fire and makes the tea and sings to himself or reads the paper to me in a whisper that won't wake up the rest of the family. Mikey Molloy stole Cuchulain, the Angel on the Seventh Step is gone someplace else, but my father in the morning is still mine. He gets the Irish Press early and tells me about the world, Hitler, Mussolini, Franco. He says this war is none of our business because the English are up to their tricks again. He tells me about the great Roosevelt in Washington and the great De Valera in Dublin. In the morning we have the world to ourselves and he never tells me I should die for Ireland.

Related Characters: Frank McCourt (speaker), Mikey Molloy, Angela Sheehan McCourt, Malachy McCourt Sr.

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 208-09

Explanation and Analysis



In this complex passage, Frank tries to come to terms with his father: a man who's both a good, loving father, and an unbelievably neglectful alcoholic. Frank can't deny that his father is endangering his (Frank's) own health by spending so much money on alcohol instead of food. Yet he also admires his father for his intelligence, his talent for storytelling, and his kindness towards Frank in these private morning sessions.

So how can Frank love and hate someone at the same time? The paradox of loving and hating simultaneously lies at the heart of Frank's childhood. Again and again, he's put in a situation where he both loves and fears something, whether it's God, his father, his education, or his family. As a young man, Frank tends to move back and forth between love and hatred for his father, and it's only much later (as an adult, when he's writing this novel) that Frank looks back at his family and accepts that his father was both despicable and admirable at the same time.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ And what's your name?
 McCourt, sir.
 That's not a Limerick name. Where did you get a name like that?
 My husband, sir. He's from the North.
 He's from the North and he leaves you here to get the relief
 from the Irish Free State. Is this what we fought for, is it?
 I don't know, sir.
 Why don't you go up to Belfast and see what the Orangemen
 will do for you, ah?
 I don't know, sir.
 You don't know. Of course you don't know. There's great
 ignorance in the world.

Related Characters: Mr. Kane, Mr. Coffey, Angela Sheehan McCourt (speaker), Malachy McCourt Sr.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 233-234

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Angela goes to the local Irish Free State office (a public place where the families of soldiers who fought for Irish independence can collect benefits) and tries to get some money to feed her family. The two men working at the office, Mr. Coffey and Mr. Kane, are polite to Angela at first, but then turn on her when they realize that she's married to Malachy, a Northern Irishman.

Coffey and Kane's taunts remind Frank of the prejudices he's forced to weather because of his father's outsider status in Limerick. Although Malachy drinks away his wages and starves his family, it's important to remember that he's not entirely to blame for his family's poverty: he can barely get a job or collect relief because his town is prejudiced against people from his part of the country. The scene is a stark reminder of the vast importance of geography, culture, and religious affiliation in Ireland.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ The three of us burst out laughing and Alphie grins with his dirty face and says Goo goo again till we're helpless and Aunt Aggie roars out of the room pulling her dress down and gives me a thump on the head that sends me against the wall baby and all. She hits Malachy too and she tries to hit Michael but he runs to the other side of her round table and she can't get at him. Come over here, she says, and I'll wipe that grin off your puss, but Michael keeps running around the table and she's too fat to catch him.

Related Characters: Frank McCourt (speaker), Michael McCourt, Malachy McCourt Jr., Aunt Aggie, Alphonsus Joseph "Alphie" McCourt

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

In this amusing scene, Frank and his siblings rebel against their family in the most satisfying of ways: they outrun their Aunt Aggie, since she's too fat to catch up. Aggie is irritated that Frank and his siblings are disturbing the new baby, Alphie, but McCourt makes it clear that Aggie is overreacting—there's no reason for her to threaten to hit her nephews.

The scene is a good example of how McCourt mixes comedy and tragedy into the same family scenes. On one level, this scene is hilarious—we can picture a bunch of little kids outrunning a fat old lady. On another level, however, the scene becomes rather tragic: the children are clearly used to corporal punishment (the norm in Ireland at the time), and they're running to save themselves from pain, not just to amuse themselves. The prevalence of corporal punishment in Frank's family reminds us that the family isn't just a site of love and affection—family life can be intimidating and frightening. Aunt Aggie seems not to love her nephews in the slightest, even though she takes care of them: she's acting out of a sense of family obligation, a rigorous code that everyone in Limerick is bound to follow.

☝☝ The next Saturday there's no telegram nor the Saturday after nor any Saturday forever. Mam begs again at the St. Vincent de Paul Society and smiles at the Dispensary when Mr. Coffey and Mr. Kane have their bit of a joke about Dad having a tart in Piccadilly. Michael wants to know what a tart is and she tells him it's something you have with tea.

Related Characters: Frank McCourt (speaker), Malachy McCourt Sr., Angela Sheehan McCourt, Michael McCourt, Mr. Kane, Mr. Coffey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis



In this quotation, Frank describes how his father leaves Limerick to find work in London. The fact that Malachy

doesn't send letters or telegrams of any kind seems to suggest that he's abandoned his family altogether: never really at home in Limerick (where he's shunned by his territorial neighbors), Malachy makes a new life for himself in a new city. There are even rumors that Malachy has taken a new lover—rumors that are too adult for Frank's little brother, Michael, to understand, as is shown in this tragicomic discussion of the "tart."

The passage is a good example of how Frank has grown over the course of the book. A few chapters ago, it would have been Frank, not Michael, who failed to understand the meaning of the word "tart" (a promiscuous woman). But Frank is maturing emotionally and sexually, and so he has some understanding of the fact that his father might be having an affair. Most heartbreaking of all is Angela's behavior in this quotation: although she's surely frightened that her husband is abandoning her altogether, her first priority is protecting her children from the truth about their father. As Frank describes it, she steers Michael away from a conversation about sexuality without batting an eye.

It isn't corned beef at all. It's a great lump of quivering gray fat and the only sign of corned beef is a little nipple of red meat on top. We stare at that bit of meat and wonder who will get it. Mam says, That's for Alphie. He's a baby, he's growing fast, he needs it. She puts it on a saucer in front of him. He pushes it away with his finger, then pulls it back. He lifts it to his mouth, looks around the kitchen, sees Lucky the dog and throws it to him.

Related Characters: Frank McCourt (speaker), Angela Sheehan McCourt, Alphonsus Joseph "Alphie" McCourt

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, the new baby, Alphie, is given the best piece of meat of anyone in the family. By this point, the McCourts are on the brink of starvation. And yet they all agree that the best food available should be given to Alphie, since he needs good nutrition to grow. Alphie's reaction is at once hilarious and tragic: even though the entire family is starving, he throws the meat on the ground.

The scene is touching, because it reminds us that Alphie is too young to know how miserable his own life is—he's too young to know that every bite of food could make the difference between life and death. Nevertheless, the scene

is comical as well. Frank, now a grown man, looks back at the episode from his childhood—and though it must have been horrifying at the time, it's amusing now.

Chapter 12 Quotes

He's not coming, Mam. He doesn't care about us. He's just drunk over there in England.
Don't talk about your father like that.

Related Characters: Angela Sheehan McCourt, Frank McCourt (speaker), Malachy McCourt Sr.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 269


Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Frank finally speaks his mind about his father. Although Frank has previously admired his father and loved him despite his flaws, it becomes increasingly clear to Frank that Malachy is an alcoholic, lazy fool who's probably abandoned his children to starve. Frank's behavior indicates that he's coming of age very quickly, and as he grows up, Frank is forced to think more and more about how to support himself and his brothers. As he looks for work and begins making money, Frank begins to despise his father for not doing the same thing.

Angela's response to Frank—"don't talk about your father like that"—suggests that in spite of her own anger with Malachy, she doesn't want her children to grow up resentful and miserable because of Malachy's actions. Undoubtedly, Angela has thought of far worse things to say about her husband, but she has enough self-control—and perhaps a desperate kind of naïveté regarding the family unit—to keep them to herself. Instead of complaining to her friends and family, she continues to stand by Malachy. Angela exhibits a calm, even heroic devotion to her family, Malachy included.

The Irish army is looking for boys who are musical and would like to train in the Army School of Music. They accept my brother, Malachy, and he goes off to Dublin to be a soldier and play the trumpet.
Now I have only two brothers at home and Mam says her family is disappearing before her very eyes.

Related Characters: Angela Sheehan McCourt, Frank McCourt (speaker), Malachy McCourt Jr.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation establishes the tragedy of Angela's life. As she raises her children into adulthood, she's forced to watch as they leave the town of Limerick to find work elsewhere. Here Malachy Jr. goes to Dublin, prompting Angela to mourn the "disappearance" of her family.

While it's clear enough that Angela's complaints aren't exactly reasonable—the family's life in Limerick is miserable, and any kind of escape is probably a good thing—it's easy to sympathize with what she's saying. Angela has worked phenomenally hard to take care of her children—going to charities, begging in the streets, encouraging her husband to work harder, etc. After her husband, Malachy Sr., abandons her to move to London, Angela continues to devote herself to her children. So when her children move away, Angela is understandably shaken. She can't help but compare her children to Malachy Sr.—she can't help but fear that she'll never see them again.


last time" and then give up masturbation forever. (Of course this never really happens.) In an eerie way, Frank's behavior in this scene is meant to remind readers of Malachy Sr.'s drinking: again and again, Malachy Sr. promises himself he'll give up drinking altogether, only to fall back on his old ways. (The difference is that by drinking, Malachy Sr. hurts his entire family, but when he experiences sexual pleasure, Frank hurts no one else, and probably isn't even hurting himself.) The pressures of Catholic life lead Frank to hate himself and feel a constant sense of guilt.

☝ I can hear Mam crying when she blows into the globe of the paraffin oil lamp and everything goes dark. After what happened she'll surely want to get into her own bed and I'm ready to go to the small one against the wall. Instead, there's the sound of her climbing the chair, the table, the chair, crying up into the loft and telling Laman Griffin, He's only a boy, tormented with his eyes, and when Laman says, He's a little shit and I want him out of the house, she cries and begs till there's whispering and grunting and moaning and nothing. In awhile they're snoring in the loft and my brothers are asleep around me.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ I can't stop interfering with myself. I pray to the Virgin Mary and tell her I'm sorry I put her Son back on the cross and I'll never do it again but I can't help myself and swear I'll go to confession and after that, surely after that, I'll never never do it again. I don't want to go to hell with devils chasing me for eternity jabbing me with hot pitchforks.

Related Characters: Frank McCourt (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

As Frank grows older, he begins to feel sexual desires. But for an Irish Catholic boy, sexual desire is a hideous sin that must be escaped at all costs. When Frank goes to church, he's told again and again that he'll go to hell for enjoying any sexual pleasures outside of marriage. (The passage seems to refer to masturbation—something that Frank believes could get him sent to Hell for eternity, and an act that also "puts Jesus back on the cross.")

The quotation is psychologically accurate in the way it shows Frank promising himself that he'll masturbate "one

Related Characters: Gerard "Laman" Griffin, Angela Sheehan McCourt, Frank McCourt (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 294-95

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Frank hears the sound of his mother sleeping in the same bed at Laman Griffin, discussing Frank's future. As Frank listens, we the readers become aware that Angela and Laman are having sex—the implication being that Angela is pleasuring her cousin in order to protect Frank; i.e., to ensure that Laman will continue to give Frank food and shelter. Frank himself, as a boy growing quickly more mature, also seems to recognize the implications of what he hears.

The quotation shows how other people in Limerick—not just Frank—struggle to reconcile their Christian faith with their real-world needs and desires. Angela is still married to Malachy Sr., meaning that she's forbidden from having sex with anyone else. And yet because of her desire to provide for Frank, her child (and also her own desire to survive), she has sex with Laman. For all her Catholic faith, Angela's priority is always her family's survival. In this way, Angela and Frank are kindred spirits: as we've seen, Frank almost always favors his own literal needs over the spiritual

requirements of his religion. Angela will do anything to protect her children—even endanger her own soul.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☞ I can't tell her about Mam and Laman Griffin and the excitement in the loft. I tell her I was thinking of staying here a while because of the great distance from Laman Griffin's house to the post office and as soon as I get on my feet we'll surely find a decent place and we'll all move on, my mother and brothers and all.
Well, she says, that's more than your father would do.

Related Characters: Aunt Aggie, Frank McCourt (speaker), Gerard "Laman" Griffin, Malachy McCourt Sr.

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 308

Explanation and Analysis

Frank chooses to leave Laman Griffin's house, because he can't stand arguing with Laman, and can't stand the idea that his mother is sleeping with him. Instead, Frank goes to stay with his Aunt Aggie, a woman whom he dislikes greatly. Frank gives Aggie a half-truth: he claims that he's moving to be closer to work. To Frank's surprise, Aggie praises Frank for his determination and drive.

It's important to keep in mind that the compliment Aggie gives Frank ("that's more than your father would do") isn't actually much of a compliment, considering what Aggie thinks of Frank's father, Malachy Sr. Aggie seems not to expect much of Frank, because he's the son of a lazy, drunken Northerner—so she's impressed that he's making any effort at all to provide money for his family. And yet even if Aggie's compliment isn't all that kind, it reminds us that Frank *is* growing into a responsible young man. Instead of escaping into drink, like many in his community, he turns to hard work to support himself and offer help to his mother and siblings.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☞ What are you supposed to do?
You're told never never go to the post office to cash one of those money orders for anyone or you'll lose your job forever. But what are you supposed to do when an old man that was in the Boer War hundreds of years ago says his legs are gone and he'd be forever grateful if you'd [...] cash the money order and keep two shillings for yourself grand boy that you are.

Related Characters: Frank McCourt (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 317

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Frank faces another version of the conflict he's been experiencing for years in Limerick: the clash between morals and rules. Frank has a job delivering telegrams, and he's under strict instructions to do nothing *but* deliver them. So when an old, suffering man begs Frank to collect money on his behalf, Frank experiences a genuine crisis: clearly, it's the "right" thing to help the old man, but he's under strict instruction to help no one (and to complicate the matter, losing this job would mean losing money for his own family).

The fact that Frank phrases his dilemma in the form of a rhetorical question suggests that he's genuinely confused about what to do: he doesn't know if it's worth risking his job to do the right thing (and ultimately, he chooses to ignore the elderly man and continue delivering telegrams). At this point in the novel, Frank is still young and immature: he's not strong and capable enough to make his own rules, and this means he has to obey the commands of other people (employers, priests, parents), unfair though they might be.

☞ We take our ease on the sofa a while till she says, Don't you have more telegrams to deliver? and when we sit up she gives a little cry, Oh, I'm bleeding.
What's up with you?
I think it's because it's the first time.
I tell her, Wait a minute. I bring the bottle from the kitchen and splash the iodine on her injury. She leaps from the sofa, dances around the parlor like a wild one and runs into the kitchen to douse herself with water.
After she dries herself she says, Lord, you're very innocent. You're not supposed to be pouring iodine on girls like that.

Related Characters: Theresa Carmody, Frank McCourt (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 324

Explanation and Analysis



Frank delivers telegrams to the Carmody house, where he encounters a pretty young girl, Theresa. In this passage,

Frank has just had sex with Theresa, something neither one of them has done before. Frank notices that Theresa is bleeding, and so he tries to use iodine to make help her "wound."

Theresa's attitude toward Frank is that of an older, more experienced woman to a younger boy. Even though Frank and Theresa are equally inexperienced when it comes to sex, Theresa seems much more confident and self-possessed here: she calls Frank "innocent" (though by Catholic laws he's anything but innocent now!), and her comments about "pouring iodine on girls" suggest that Frank is sexually inexperienced as well (and has in fact caused Theresa pain with his well-intentioned iodine). The irony of the scene is that even after losing his virginity—supposedly a mark of maturity—Frank continues to feel immature, and to act in an amusingly immature way. Indeed, Frank will struggle with feelings of guilt for months to come, due in large part to his belief that any sex out of wedlock is a grievous sin.

☝ 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.

Related Characters: Frank McCourt (speaker), Theresa Carmody

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 325

Explanation and Analysis

Theresa—the girl to whom Frank loses his virginity—has died suddenly of tuberculosis. Because Frank had sex with Theresa shortly before her death, he believes that he's condemned Theresa to an eternity spent in hell. Theresa's death represents the first time in the memoir that Frank believes his sinful actions have harmed another person. (He's stolen and masturbated, but in these cases his actions are shown to hurt no one else.)

As misplaced as Frank's guilt might seem to some readers, it's a mark of Frank's growing maturity that he's realizing that his actions have consequences for other people. As Frank explains, he's been surrounded by death for his entire life—but it's not until this moment that he feels truly

responsible for another person's pain. The guilt and anxiety that Frank feels for Theresa's damnation outweighs anything he ever felt for Oliver or Eugene, his deceased brothers (although a large part of his sadness probably also comes from the outsized emotions of young love). Frank is growing into a thoughtful, mature young man, but the burden of his maturity is to feel guilty for harming others.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝☝ She whispers to Miss Barry and they look at me and shake their heads.

A disgrace he is to Ireland and his poor mother. I hope she never finds out. But what would you expect of one born in America and his father from the North. We put up with all that and still took him back.

She keeps talking past me again to the boys on the bench.

Related Characters: Frank McCourt (speaker), Mrs. O'Connell, Miss Barry

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 337

Explanation and Analysis

Frank has a steady job working at the local post office. But instead of attending his exams—exams that would enable him to become a postman—Frank chooses to interview for a job distributing newspapers. When Frank returns from his job interview, he's surprised to find that his employers at the post office are furious with him: they've interpreted his behavior as arrogant and irresponsible.

Although the women at the post office think of Frank as a "bad sort," they're revealing their own small-mindedness as they criticize Frank. There's nothing particularly wrong with interviewing for a newspaper job, but the women at the post office don't like it, because it suggests that Frank thinks he's "too good" for post office work. Furthermore, working at the post office is such a traditional career option for poor Irish boys that to go off the beaten path is, implicitly, to insult all of Irish culture. In short, the post office employees distrust anyone who's different from them—and they try to punish Frank for his independence with this amusingly narrow-minded sort of "guilt trip."

For his part, Frank shows that he's an original, forward-thinking young man: he refuses to take the beaten path simply because lots of other people have taken it before him. Even as a young man, he's beginning to distrust and actively resent life in Limerick: he wants a way out.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☞ But I want to know about Theresa Carmody in hell, Father. No, my child. She is surely in heaven. She suffered like the martyrs in olden times and God knows that's penance enough. You can be sure the sisters in the hospital didn't let her die without a priest.
Are you sure, Father?
I am, my child.

Related Characters: Father Gregory, Frank McCourt (speaker), Theresa Carmody

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 343

Explanation and Analysis


Frank, still wracked with guilt at having had sex with Theresa Carmody before her untimely death, confesses his sin to Father Gregory. To Frank's surprise and relief, Gregory assures Frank that Theresa would have confessed her sins to a priest before her death—in other words, her soul is in no danger of damnation.

Even more important than the information that Frank receives from Father Gregory is the fact that Frank is confessing to a priest in the first place. In the past, Frank struggles with obeying the tenets of Catholicism—indeed, McCourt suggests that some of these tenets are ridiculous and unfair. But in this passage, McCourt suggests that there are many aspects of Irish Catholicism, particularly the confession, that serve a useful purpose (particularly in the hands of an empathetic priest like Father Gregory). Frank has been feeling guilty about Theresa for months and he feels tied up in Theresa's disease and death. By finally confessing that he and Theresa had sex, then, Frank is choosing to move on from the past. Frank admits that he's sinned, and in the act of admitting this, his sins become past. No longer burdened with a sense of guilt and involvement in Limerick life, Frank is free to look forward to a new life in America.

☞ Frieda tells the priest I had a bit of a dizziness after going to the bathroom, that's what happens when you travel and you're drinking a strange beer like Rheingold, which she believes they don't have in Ireland. I can see the priest doesn't believe her and I can't stop the way the heat is coming and going in my face. He already wrote down my mother's name and address and now I'm afraid he'll write and say your fine son spent his first night in America in a bedroom in Poughkeepsie romping with a woman whose husband was away shooting deer for a bit of relaxation after doing his bit for America in the war and isn't this a fine way to treat the men who fought for their country.

Related Characters: Frieda, Frank McCourt (speaker), Angela Sheehan McCourt, Tim Boyle

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 361

Explanation and Analysis

Frank sets sail from Limerick for America. When he arrives in America, he's greeted by a Catholic priest, Tim Boyle. Despite Boyle's warnings, Frank is immediately seduced by and has sex with a woman named Frieda, whose husband, Boyle tells us, is away hunting deer. In essence, Boyle represents everything that Frank has been trying to escape: Catholic guilt, family obligation, patriotism (the reference to "doing his bit" reminds us of the IRA officials who still grumble about the sacrifices they made for their country), etc.

In spite of Boyle's presence, however, Frank seems remarkably relaxed. Although Frank looks back on his time in Ireland with affection and even nostalgia, he also chooses to leave his country behind in favor of a new place. By the same token, he makes the conscious choice not to listen to the authority figures who bossed him around as a child. Thus, after years of being made to feel guilty for his sexuality, here he decides to embrace sexuality without regret. Frank's new sense of freedom and power is emphasized by the contrast with Tim Boyle. Although some of the other priests in the memoir are intimidating, larger-than-life figures who fill the young Frank with terror, Boyle only seems petty and incompetent, and one gets the sense that Frank is tuning him out. Frank isn't frightened of priests, or the rules of Catholicism, anymore. He's ready to begin a new life in America—a life that will one day result in his becoming a famous writer.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The narrator, Frank McCourt, describes being born in New York to a large family. Frank's parents moved back to their original home, Ireland, when Frank was four years old. Frank is the eldest of his siblings. He has a brother, Malachy Jr., who is one year younger than he is, and two twin brothers, Oliver and Eugene, who are three years younger. Frank also had a younger sister named Margaret McCourt, who died as a small child. Frank notes that his childhood was "miserable"—so miserable that he can't imagine how he survived. The worst kind of childhood, he notes, is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.

Among all the horrors of an Irish Catholic childhood, Frank explains, "wetness" is the most common. In the city of Limerick, Ireland, there is a constant rain. The rain spreads diseases and gives people bad coughs. There is so much rain in Limerick that as a young boy Frank and his family would go to the church just to be dry.

Frank's father is named Malachy McCourt (Malachy Sr.). He was born in Toome, and had a rough life, always getting in trouble. As a baby, he was dropped on his head—supposedly, this accident made him "a bit peculiar." Malachy Sr. liked being in New York because, in spite of Prohibition (laws prohibiting any alcohol sale or consumption), there were speakeasies where he could drink. At the end of his life, Malachy moved to Belfast and gave up alcohol. He died in a hospital, unremarkably.

Frank's mother, Angela Sheehan, grew up in Limerick, with a big family. She never knew her own father, who had left the family shortly before she was due to be born. Frank describes what Angela's father might have been like, years ago. He would drink heavily, late into the night, and sing bawdy Irish songs. Once he was playing with his son, Patrick Sheehan, and dropped him on the floor, hurting him. Angela's mother (Frank's grandmother) was so furious that she yelled for her husband to get out of the house. He obliged, and left for Australia. As a result of being dropped on the ground, Patrick (Frank's uncle) grew up feeble-minded.

Angela's Ashes provides an interesting twist on the usual narrative of "immigrant fiction"—here the protagonist is born in America, goes to Ireland, and then spends his early adulthood trying to go back. From the start, Frank McCourt makes it clear that his memoir is not going to be a happy one—it's going to be about his "miserable Irish Catholic childhood." He is direct and sometimes even humorous about the varieties of misery he experienced, however, and this keeps the book moving forward at a quick, entertaining pace.



Right away, McCourt draws a distinction between religious values and survival. He suggests that the people of Limerick go to church to survive, first, and foremost, and to learn about Christianity second. At the same time, this image also shows how important the church is to daily life in Limerick—it is the natural place to go for shelter.



The first thing we learn about Malachy McCourt is that he's a little "strange in the head." The second thing we learn about him is that he's an alcoholic—indeed, Malachy's drunkenness will be his most recognizable character trait throughout the memoir. Interestingly, we're told that Malachy gives up drinking at the end of his life—a fact that McCourt never mentions again. For the purposes of the book, however, Malachy is a drunkard through and through.



McCourt doesn't disguise the misery that drinking can cause—in this scene, for instance, a man drops a child on the floor, ruining the child's brain and changing the rest of his life, simply because he'd had too much to drink. What may seem like a small indulgence at the time (a few drinks too many) can actually have profound and lasting effects on other people. This will become all too apparent as the memoir continues, and we see the vicious cycle of drinking and misery perpetuating itself.



Angela had a rough birth, and caused her mother great pain. Frank imagines how the scene would have unfolded: Angela's mother screaming in pain, calling out the name of Saint Jude, the patron saint of the dying. Angela was born at the exact instant that it became the New Year: her head emerged in the old year, and her body came out in the new year.

As a young girl, Angela learned basic reading and arithmetic. As a young woman, she tried various careers, but failed in all of them: she couldn't be a maid, for example, because she didn't know how to curtsy properly. Her mother suggested that she go to **America** to find a career. Angela arrived in America just after the beginning of the Great Depression. She met Malachy Sr., her future husband, at a party. She was attracted to his "hangdog look." Together, they had a "knee-trembler," which Frank defines as a sexual encounter in which the man pushes the woman up against the wall.

Frank describes how his parents were married. Malachy Sr. was an unlikely candidate for marrying Angela, because his family wasn't respectable at all—in fact, he'd just done three months in prison when he met Angela for the first time. He was also rumored to have Presbyterians in his family—a sure sign of wickedness, supposedly. But because Frank had had sex with Angela, Angela's cousins, Delia Fortune and Philomena Flynn, insisted that they get married, so as not to disgrace Angela any further. Malachy didn't want to get married. He could barely support himself, much less an entire family. Nevertheless, he had nowhere to run, and in March he married Angela. That August, Angela gave birth to a child named Male. (Malachy Sr. wanted to call the child Malachy, but couldn't spell the word.) When "Male" was baptized, the priests gave it the name Francis, after Malachy Sr.'s own father. Thus, Frank got his name.

A year after Frank was born, Angela and Malachy Sr. had another child, Malachy Jr. Frank and Malachy grew up playing around Classon Avenue in Brooklyn. One day, Frank and Malachy were playing on a seesaw. When Frank jumped off the seesaw, Malachy fell to the ground and cut his mouth. Malachy went running to his mother, who yelled at Frank for hurting his own brother. Frank distinctly remembers this, because it was the first time he ever saw blood. Soon after, he noticed a dog that had been hit by a car: in this way, he learned that everything bleeds.

McCourt basically explains the symbolism of Angela's birth for us. Angela is caught between the "old world" of Catholicism, strict piety, and loyalty to one's husband, and the "new world" represented by (among many other things) America, travel, and film. While Angela herself never really explores this brave new world, her loyalty to her values makes it possible for her children to do so—she is the intermediary between old and new.



In contrast to McCourt's more thorough descriptions of his parents' idiosyncrasies and personalities (his father's love for alcohol, for example), McCourt doesn't go into much detail at all about what attracted Angela to Malachy McCourt in the first place—the "hangdog look" is his only explanation. Just as with Angela's father's clumsy, drunken treatment of Patrick, Angela and Malachy's clumsy, drunken encounter seems insignificant at the time, but it ends up determining the course of both of their lives and the lives of all their children.



McCourt introduces an important theme of the novel here: the divide between Northern and Southern Ireland. At this point, Angela's family doesn't know anything much about Malachy—all they know about him is that he's from the North (and yet, unlike most Northerners, he's not a Protestant). The Southern Irish saw Northerners as essentially treacherous and as being too friendly to the hated English. Angela's family's regional loyalties are so great that they're reluctant to see Malachy Sr., basically a "foreigner," marry Angela. And yet in the end, the family's Catholic loyalties win out over their regional loyalties: Malachy may be a Northerner, but since he and Angela are Catholic, they have to get married, or else risk "living in sin."



There are almost no idyllic scenes in McCourt's description of his childhood. Indeed, the few simple, happy moments in the memoir quickly devolve into violence or misery—here, for example, a cheerful afternoon playing in the street quickly turns into a more frightening scene. It's as if Frank's way of looking at the world has been determined by the misery he witnessed, or experienced firsthand, as a young boy.



Growing up, Frank was an “odd child.” Even his mother told him that he was odd, just like his father. Malachy Jr., on the other hand, was a happy child, and always laughed at everything. Malachy Sr., an alcoholic, barely ate anything. Sometimes he would make money by sweeping out bars at the end of the day. He complained that his children were hungry all the time—Angela pointed out that they were starving.

When Malachy Sr. brought home money for the week, everything was good. Angela would go to buy groceries, and Malachy Sr. would entertain his children by telling elaborate stories about exotic places like Brazil. There would be treats like bread and jam for the children to eat. But sometimes Malachy Sr. wouldn't bring home food or money. Sometimes, even when he had a job, he would go drinking, and spend all the family's money on whiskey. He'd come home very drunk and Angela would yell at him for depriving his children of food. Angela would try to save money by going to the bars where her husband worked and asking for some of the wages upfront. But this never worked—the employers wouldn't give it up.

Sometimes, Malachy Sr. wouldn't come home at all. When this happened, Angela would take Frank, Malachy Jr., Oliver, and Eugene to look for her husband. They would go from bar to bar, walking along the streets of Brooklyn. Once, the family spends hours looking for Malachy Sr., traveling from bar to bar. At one bar, Angela asks a bartender to fill two jugs with sugar-water for her children. Very generously, the barman fills the jugs with milk. Finally, after hours of searching, Angela gives up and leads her children to the grocery store. There, she is able to buy food on credit, because the Italian man who runs the store trusts her.

The next week, Malachy Sr. loses his job sweeping bars. He comes home on Friday with wages—but these will be his last wages for a long time. He takes some of the money and goes out to drink. He comes back later, singing loudly.

Several months later, Malachy Sr. comes home after a day of looking for a job. He holds Margaret McCourt, the new baby (born a few months before). He sings her a song about a leprechaun, and Margaret giggles. Angela notices that Margaret seems to cheer Malachy Sr. up—in fact, since she was born, he hasn't had anything to drink.

As a young boy, Frank was too young to understand the unfairness of his situation: Malachy Sr. had enough money to feed his family, but instead of using the money properly, he spent it on alcohol. It's important to note that Frank resembles his father in some ways as well, however—starting with the “oddness” Angela points out.



In this section, we see the two sides of Malachy Sr.'s personality. On one hand, he's a loving father who enjoys entertaining his children. On the other hand, he's a lazy, negligent parent who never works hard enough, and usually wastes his money on alcohol instead of feeding his children. McCourt conveys the difficulty of Angela's situation: not only must she work hard to take care of her family, but she also must work against her family in some cases—i.e., she must go behind her husband's back to ensure that he doesn't squander his money.



This scene establishes an important pattern in the memoir. It's as if the McCourt family is split into two camps: one is made up of Angela and her children, and the other consists of Malachy and Malachy alone. Also we see the way that Angela must rely on the kindness of strangers, most of whom are sympathetic to her children. Without the generosity of people like the barman, Angela and her children would probably have starved to death.



Instead of making a direct judgment on his father, McCourt describes his relationship with Malachy Sr. in spare, understated terms, the way a small child would see it. In other words, we see the injustice of Malachy Sr.'s actions, even if the young Frank McCourt isn't fully aware of them—it's the only way of life he's ever known.



Malachy Sr. gives up alcohol following the birth of his child. This reinforces the point that alcohol is a way for him to fight his feelings of depression and hopelessness—with a happy baby in his house, Malachy Sr. isn't feeling so hopeless, and thus doesn't need beer.



One day Frank is walking around the playground near where his family lives. He's watching his two twin brothers, Oliver and Eugene, while his mother rests. He's not to disturb his mother until she pokes her head out the window and yells for him to come back inside. As Frank plays with his brothers, a boy named Freddie Leibowitz rushes into the playground. He starts to tell Malachy Jr. and the twins a story that Frank had told Freddie weeks before: the story of Cuchulain, the legendary Irish hero. Frank is so concerned that Freddie is stealing his story that he yells at Freddie and tries to hit him. Crying, Freddie runs away.

Frank notices that his brothers are getting very hungry—in fact, they're beginning to cry. He decides to go to the grocery store to find bananas to feed the twins. But because he has no money, he decides to steal the bananas. Just as Frank is preparing to steal, the Italian man who runs the grocery yells to Frank. He tells Frank that he has a bag of fruit that he needs to get rid of, and he offers it to Frank. The bag contains bananas, which the man suggests Frank give to the twins.

At dinner in the evening, Malachy Sr. reads the paper and says that President Franklin Roosevelt will provide every man in **America** with a job. Angela notices that Frank has a bag of fruit—she demands to know where he got it. Frank explains that the Italian grocer gave it to him. Angela doesn't seem excited. Instead, she mentions that Freddie's mother told her that Frank hit Freddie. Angela orders Frank to go apologize to Freddie. Frank explains that Freddie stole his Cuchulain story. Malachy Sr. explains that Freddie has his own stories, because he's a Jew: he has stories about Moses and Samson.

Frank goes to apologize to Freddie. At the Leibowitz home, located in the same building where the McCourts live, Frank is escorted inside, and he apologizes to Freddie. Freddie's parents offer Frank some food, and he accepts cake and milk from them.

The day after Frank apologizes to Freddie, Angela wakes Frank up, explaining that something is horribly wrong with the baby, Margaret McCourt—she's very sick. A doctor is called to the house, and he examines Margaret. The doctor seems busy and irritable—he complains that he doesn't have all day to look at her. Without explaining what's wrong with Margaret, he wraps the child in a thick blanket, and leaves. For the rest of the day, the family tries to care for Margaret, and Malachy Sr. begins to drink whiskey for the first time since Margaret's birth.

From an early age, Frank is interested in storytelling. He feels a strong yet irrational sense that he owns the stories he tells—as if he's "invented" the story in the act of telling it to someone new. This mirrors the process by which Frank composed Angela's Ashes. By writing about Limerick in the 30s and 40s, Frank asserts his authorial personality, and might be said to exercise a kind of "ownership" of the city's history at this time.



Although Frank can be proud and greedy when it comes to storytelling, he clearly has a strong protective instinct that leads him to look out for his siblings at all times. This protective instinct, coupled with his own need to survive, leads Frank to break the laws in service of his own "greater good." Frank's guilt at having planned to take advantage of a man who was going to help him prefigures his experiences with Catholicism and guilt later on.



Angela probably is "excited" to have a bag of fruit in the house, but she knows her job isn't just to feed her family—she must also teach her children to learn right from wrong. That's why she jumps from asking Frank about the fruit to telling him to apologize to Freddie. We're also reminded of how personally invested Frank is in storytelling, and in the stories he considers to be his own. Malachy Sr. seems to agree with his son's sentiments.



The Leibowitzes' generosity comes as a surprise to Frank, especially because Angela's sternness in the previous section had made him expect a confrontation. It doesn't seem so surprising from an outside perspective, however, as all the neighbors can clearly see the McCourts' poverty, and they naturally pity the children.



The tragedy of Margaret's death (which Frank already told us about in the first page of the book) is that she could have survived with the right medical support. It's unclear if this particular doctor was just overworked and stressed, or if he was expressing some anti-Irish sentiment. In the face of tragedy, Malachy Sr. turns to alcohol, confirming that he drinks to ease his pain, not to bring himself pleasure.



As the day draws to a close, Angela gives a cry: Margaret McCourt has died, mysteriously. Mrs. Leibowitz, Freddie's mother, rushes down the hall of the apartment building to comfort Angela. She tells Angela that God takes young children sometimes, and that Margaret is in a better place. Angela, weeping, whispers that her husband will start drinking again and starve his family to death.

In moments of tragedy such as this one, the characters turn to religion. Believing in heaven could be considered a coping mechanism for Angela and her family—they come to accept Margaret's death because they know that Margaret is happier in heaven. And yet even as she clings to faith, Angela is also a harsh realist in this scene, as she knows her husband is going to start drinking again.



In the days following Margaret McCourt's death, Malachy Sr. is barely present, and Angela barely leaves her bed. Frank tries to take care of his family, and he changes the twins' diapers. One night, Malachy Sr. comes home late, reeking of whiskey. He orders his children to wake up and promise him that they'll "die for Ireland." They promise, confused, and then go back to bed.

In contrast to Angela's realistic, measured approach to living, Malachy Sr. seems almost like a child—retreating into alcohol and melodramatic patriotism instead of meeting his problems head-on. It's later suggested that Malachy Sr. was involved in the Easter Rising of 1916—the rebellion in Ireland that led to Irish independence from England in the South.



The night that his father makes him promise to die for Ireland, Frank dreams about Cuchulain, the Irish hero. In the dream Cuchulain waves a massive bananas at a bird. When Frank tells his father about the dream, Malachy Sr. says that Ireland has no bananas.

Frank has been raised on epic, idealized tales of Cuchulain, a mythological Irish hero—but this scene shows how little Frank still knows about the reality of Ireland.



Weeks pass, and Minnie MacAdorey, a kind neighbor in the McCourts' building, stops by their home to offer food to the children. Mrs. Leibowitz feeds the McCourt children, as well, and even shows them how to take care of Oliver and Eugene—wipe their bottoms, change their diapers, etc. The Italian grocer offers Frank more food for his family, and Frank eagerly accepts whatever he can get. Over time, Frank learns that the man's name is Mr. Dimino, and that he's married to a woman named Angela—Frank's mother's name, too.

In Brooklyn, and later in Ireland, Frank and his family rely on the help of strangers and neighbors. Mrs. Leibowitz isn't connected to the McCourts in any cultural or religious way (in fact, she has some reason to dislike them, since Frank attacked Freddie), and yet she is enormously generous with her time and money.



One day, Frank comes back to his home to find Mrs. Leibowitz, Minnie MacAdorey, and two large women, who introduce themselves as Angela's cousins, Delia Fortune and Philomena Flynn. The cousins criticize Frank's father, mentioning that he's "from the North." They also tell Frank and his siblings terrifying stories about Northern men who kidnap babies to "do experiments on." After some time, Angela comes home. Frank realizes that Mrs. Leibowitz and Minnie have sent for Angela's cousins to help the family. With Delia's help, Philomena writes a letter to Angela's own mother, whose name is Margaret Sheehan. Together, they write about their own husbands, criticize Malachy Sr. for his laziness, and tell Angela's mother that Margaret McCourt, Angela's baby, has died. In the letter, Delia insists that Angela and her children would be better off back in Ireland.

Frank slowly becomes aware of his father's outsider status in Ireland. In a way, his childish concept of what "North" means is no more mature or intelligent than Delia and Philomena's understanding of what it means to be Northern Irish. Indeed, both Delia and Philomena demonize Northern Ireland in an almost childish way—they're telling Frank a fantastic story, but we can sense that on some level, they believe what they're saying, and these kinds of prejudices will have long-lasting consequences for the family.



Shortly after the letter is sent, Margaret Sheehan sends money for Frank and his family to travel to Ireland. Everyone boards a large ship. When the ship begins its long voyage across the Atlantic, everyone on board waves goodbye, except for Angela, who leans over the side of the vessel and vomits.

The “prologue” of the memoir is over—from hereon out, the McCourts will be in Ireland. Angela’s vomiting seems like a bad omen for what’s to come in Limerick.



CHAPTER 2

The McCourt family sails toward Moville, Ireland, from New York. They arrive after a week, and then travel to Belfast, where “Grandpa McCourt” (Malachy Sr.’s father) lives. As the family travels through the countryside, the children are delighted by the sights of cows and sheep—it’s the first time they’ve ever seen these animals in the flesh.

This is one of the more overt homages to James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which there’s a similar scene involving cows and sheep. At first, Frank thinks of Ireland as a lovely, fantastical place, full of strange creatures. This will change quickly.



The family arrives at Grandpa McCourt’s house. There, he greets the family and gives them pancakes and eggs. At breakfast, Grandpa McCourt asks his son, Malachy Sr. how he intends to find work in Ireland, since conditions there are worse than in **America**. He suggests that Malachy Sr. go to search for work in Dublin, where there are more opportunities. The next day, the family boards a bus to Dublin.

The futility of the McCourt’s trip to Ireland is made clear right away: working conditions in Ireland are considerably worse than those in America, the country the McCourts just came from. The only advantage the McCourts will have here is the support of their family—even if that family disapproves of them.



In Dublin, Malachy Sr. goes to speak with a Mr. Heggarty, an official in the IRA (Irish Republican Army). Malachy Sr. explains that he fought for the IRA, and is entitled to some money. Heggarty claims there’s no record of Malachy’s service in this capacity. Malachy becomes angry, and demands money to buy a pint of beer. Heggarty sends him out of the building and warns him never to come back.

It becomes more clear that Malachy Sr. may have fought in the Easter Rising of 1916—the rebellion that led to the independence of an Irish Republic following World War I. It’s possible that the IRA official is prejudiced against Malachy Sr. because he looks like a Northerner (and thus an opponent of the IRA), or else Malachy may be actually exaggerating his “service.” In any event, it’s clear that Malachy Sr. is loyal to the Southern Irish population, not to his Northern heritage.



Malachy Sr. brings his family to a police station, where he’s forced to ask the officers if he and his family can spend the night there (this wasn’t uncommon in Ireland at the time). The police guards offer the McCourts more food, which they eagerly accept. The next day, the police officers reveal that they’ve raised enough money to send Malachy Sr. and his family to Limerick, where there should be more work. Before the family leaves, Malachy Sr. takes Frank to see the famous statue of Cuchulain that stands in the center of the town. Frank is thrilled to finally see his hero.

McCourt never explains exactly why the police officers assist Malachy Sr. so extravagantly—the scene is depicted from a child’s point of view, so that our knowledge of the details is highly limited. Even in a moment when McCourt depicts him as pathetic, Malachy Sr. isn’t an entirely unsympathetic figure. He’s not a strong man or a good worker, but he does seem fairly close to Frank—he even goes out of his way to show Frank the statue of Cuchulain, since he’d been telling Frank stories about the legendary Irish hero back in Brooklyn.



The McCourts travel by train to Limerick with the last of their money. In Limerick, Margaret Sheehan is waiting for them, already seeming furious with Angela and Malachy Sr. She criticizes Malachy Sr. for smoking, and Frank can see that she's angry with her daughter for marrying him. Margaret takes the McCourts to her home, where she draws the children's attention to a cross hanging over the fireplace. When neither Frank nor Malachy Jr. seems interested, Margaret mutters that Irish children should know about the Sacred Heart.

Margaret Sheehan is like Limerick personified: she's generous with her time and money, but in her attitude is extremely hostile to all those who aren't from Southern Ireland (especially the Northern Irish), and is also fiercely religious, criticizing Frank and his siblings for not knowing more about Catholicism. Frank has been raised in America, far from the environment of strict, nationalistic Catholicism that pervades daily life in Limerick.



In the evening of their first day in Margaret Sheehan's house, Frank begins to see how packed his new living situation is. Margaret, his grandmother, lives with Angela's sister, Aunt Aggie. Aggie and Angela will have to sleep together, and Frank will sleep with his siblings. The next day, Margaret and Aggie take Angela to a local boardinghouse, where Aggie lives with her husband, Pa Keating—Angela and her family are to live there. Margaret pays the rent in the room, and gives Angela cutlery, pots, etc. The McCourts settle into their new home, still depending entirely on Margaret's money. During the day, Malachy Sr. claims to go off in search of work, but he fails to find any.

In spite of Margaret's harsh manner with Frank and his siblings, she proves herself to be an extremely generous person, donating her time, money, and property to ensure her extended family's survival. The family bond determines much of what the people of Limerick do—when Angela shows up before her mother, begging for financial assistance, Margaret doesn't even consider refusing her help, however much she might disapprove of her daughter's life choices.



The McCourts' new home becomes infested with fleas. Malachy Sr. tries to better the problem by "beating" his mattress, but nothing works. One night, Malachy Sr. shakes Frank awake and tells him Angela is in great pain. The other McCourts wake up and realize that they're covered in fleabites—their skin is red and bloody. One night, Malachy Sr. rushes Angela to a hospital. He comes home the next morning, saying that Angela will be all right soon. Frank overhears his Aunt Aggie saying, "The child is lost."

The McCourts endure a great deal of physical pain and sickness as a result of their poverty in Limerick. From Aggie's remark, we can surmise that Angela has had a miscarriage. As we've seen before, McCourt depicts this scene—a very adult scene—the way a child like Frank would perceive it; i.e., barely understanding what's going on.



A few days later, Malachy Sr. concludes that there's no way for a man with a Northern Irish accent to find work in Limerick. He goes on unemployment benefits, and gets a measly 19 shillings a week—not even close to enough to support a family of six. To make matters worse, Malachy Sr. smokes more and more cigarettes, depriving his family of money. Even Angela smokes as well.

It's difficult to tell if Malachy Sr. is right to say that no work is available for a Northern Irishman in Limerick, or if he's only lying to himself to justify his failures and excuse his drinking. McCourt has provided ample evidence for both possibilities.



To get more money, Angela and her family walk to the local Quaker church, run by Mr. Quinlivan. Angela tells Quinlivan that her daughter, Margaret McCourt, died only a few months ago. Quinlivan promises to send people to Angela's house, where they'll determine that Angela's need for food is genuine, and then provide her with money. Angela also learns from the women in Limerick which grocery stores to attend to get the most food for her money.

Angela turns to charity in the absence of a husband who can support her. In sharp contrast to her husband's laziness and hopelessness, Angela works hard, researching the best ways to spend her money. While on the surface, there's doesn't seem to be anything difficult about what she's doing—just collecting money from other people—Mccourt makes it clear that Angela is actually the hardest working member of her family.



After the Quakers provide Angela with some money, Angela and a woman she's befriended, Nora Molloy, sit outside, smoking and talking. Nora Molloy reminisces about falling in love with her husband, Peter Molloy, a "boozer with the charm." Nora coughs heavily and complains that either smoking or consumption (tuberculosis) will kill her. Nora also advises Angela to go to the St. Vincent de Paul society for more charity.

In the coming weeks, Angela manages to support her family by collecting charity and appealing to people's sympathy. One day, a woman in the street gives Angela an onion and pepper—supposedly a good medicine for young children. Aunt Aggie and Pa Keating also help to support Frank and his siblings—they're amazed that the children haven't heard of basic things like porridge.

The chapter cuts ahead to one evening when Frank is about to go to sleep. His parents are out of the house, and Oliver is with them. Frank goes to sleep, but a few hours later, he feels his father waking him up. Malachy Sr. explains that Oliver has died of the cold. Malachy Sr. and Angela weep profusely. Malachy Sr., Pa Keating, and Frank go to the local pub. There, Frank sees his father and Pa Keating drinking "black stuff" from a glass. Malachy Sr. becomes angry when the bartender cuts him off—he yells that he "did his bit" for Ireland in 1916, and then begins weeping for Oliver once again.

The next day, Frank and his family go to the hospital, where Oliver's body is placed in a coffin and sent to the cemetery to be buried. Angela weeps as she watches Oliver being buried. She worries aloud that Eugene—the surviving twin—will grow up strange because he misses his brother.

The next day, Malachy Sr. goes to collect his unemployment benefits, and promises to bring home groceries that afternoon. He doesn't return until late in the evening, however, and when he returns he's extremely drunk. Angela yells at Malachy Sr. for starving his family, and he's too drunk to reply.

In the coming days, Angela insists that she wants to move to a new home—she can't stand being in a flea-ridden place where her own child died. She suggests moving to a room on Windmill Street, near the local school. From now on, she goes with her husband to collect unemployment benefits—Malachy Sr. doesn't like this, since it limits his "drinking money," but because he's been feeling guilty, he doesn't stop her. Angela begins to save more money. She's able to move her family to a new apartment room by promising to pay the rent soon.

There's a mood of hopelessness everywhere in Limerick—the people joke about dying, as if their only remaining option is to make light of their miserable situation. Angela takes Nora's advice to heart, and she goes to the de Paul Society for the rest of the book.



In the absence of a reliable husband who can support her, Angela turns to the next-best thing: her family. The helpfulness of Nora, Aggie, and the others—all of whom presumably have troubles of their own—makes Malachy's hopelessness seem more pathetic, and more clearly a product of his own delusion, depression, or alcoholism.



In this tragic scene, Frank loses yet another sibling. It's telling that Malachy Sr. turns to alcohol for comfort and relief soon after Oliver goes to the hospital. Malachy Sr. is almost a sympathetic character here—as the book goes on, it becomes clearer and clearer that Malachy did in fact fight for the South of Ireland against England. He's fought for Limerick, and yet Limerick still despises him for being born in the North.



Even in a moment of tragedy, Angela doesn't have the luxury of wallowing—she must already think ahead to the next thing, in this case, the happiness of her remaining child, Eugene.



Malachy Sr.'s drunkenness is almost literally murderous—by spending money on alcohol, he's depriving his children of the food they need to survive. We can feel Angela's frustration, and it seems totally justified.



While Malachy Sr. tries to "forget" about the tragedies in his life using alcohol, Angela can't escape so easily. As a result, she's forced to turn to other forms of escape—in this case, literally moving to a different building to avoid the tragic memories of Oliver.



Frank and his siblings begin going to school. School is a terrifying place—Frank is bullied for sounding like a “Yank,” and when he protests, the schoolmaster, Mr. O’Dea, beats him with a cane. Frank learns that O’Dea hates the English with a special passion.

Frank experiences being bullied for being an “outsider.” From an early age, then, he’s already conscious of being different from the people around him, and of the strong “group mentality” in Limerick.



In the coming weeks, Malachy Jr. and Frank try to play with Eugene. Eugene was very close with Oliver, and misses his brother terribly. He never laughs, and barely eats. Six months after Oliver’s death, Eugene dies of pneumonia. The doctor points out that the McCourts have chest problems, and need to be careful to keep warm and dry. Angela is devastated by the loss of another child—she sleeps for longer hours, and often can’t force herself to get out of bed. Malachy Sr. retreats to the pubs, just as he did when Oliver died. Eventually, Margaret Sheehan has to convince Angela to get out of bed in the morning. Margaret explains that Angela is still a mother—she has living children to take care of.

Here we see Angela temporarily succumbing to the tragedies of her life and giving up on her duties as a mother, even if only for a few days. It’s telling that Margaret Sheehan, Angela’s mother, is the one who pulls Angela out of her depression—we can sense that Margaret herself experienced similar adversity as a much younger woman, and now has to convince her child to move on with her life. While men in Limerick are tasked with making money and working, McCourt suggests that women, especially mothers, have a much more challenging job.



At Eugene’s funeral, all of Frank’s family is in attendance, including aunts and uncles he’s never met before. Malachy Sr. shows up drunk for the funeral. Margaret is furious with him, and she hisses that his own child deserves his dignity.

Malachy Sr. isn’t even stable enough to stay sober at his own son’s funeral—and yet it’s also the tragedy of his son’s death that makes him drink more in the first place.



After Eugene’s funeral, Frank’s life changes. He sleeps with Malachy Jr. in Eugene’s old bed, and thinks about how cold Eugene must be, buried in the ground.

Frank is capable of great feats of sympathy and imagination, and here he gives us an especially heartbreaking image of his lost brother.



CHAPTER 3

After Eugene’s death, the family moves rooms again—once again, Angela says she can’t stand living in the place where her son died. They move to a room that’s farther from school, meaning that Frank gets less time at home in the afternoon. Meanwhile, Angela “sees” Eugene everywhere. Nevertheless, she remains a devoted mother to Frank and Malachy Jr., and keeps going to St. Vincent de Paul to pick up used mattresses and other furniture. Shortly after moving in, Angela realizes that the outhouse, which is right next to the McCourts’ house, is used by all eleven families on their street, and it’s filthy. She says that they’ll need to move once again—but Malachy Sr. insists that this will be impossible and impractical.

Angela doesn’t forget about her dead children, but she doesn’t wallow in her memories either—instead, she goes ahead with the duties of being a mother, obtaining food, money, and furniture for her offspring. Malachy’s insistence that moving is impractical is especially infuriating, considering how little he does to support his own family—there’s not a “practical” bone in his body.



It's nearly time for Christmas in Limerick. The McCourt family gets less unemployment money because of the twins' deaths—16 shillings a week instead of 19. Malachy Sr. tries to get work at local mills and factories, but he's turned away because of his Northern Irish accent and ill-fitting clothing. In the evenings he still drinks sometimes, and still wakes Frank and his brother up to make them promise to die for Ireland. One day, Frank comes home from school to find his home flooded. The family moves to the room upstairs, which they nickname "Italy," because it's warm and dry. Angela and Malachy Sr. have had to sell their furniture to make ends meet. At the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Angela is able to get sausages and a pig's head to eat for Christmas, but no ham or goose.

On Christmas Day, the McCourts are in a crisis. They find that they've run out of coal, and they have to search for stray lumps of coal in the streets outside their home. Luckily they're able to find some, and they have a large meal, complete with pig's head. It rains all day, but inside their home the McCourts are happy.

Soon after Christmas, Angela gives birth to a new child, Michael. As a baby, Michael has trouble breathing, but Malachy Sr. is able to keep him alive by sucking the mucus from Michael's nose, an act Frank finds both wondrous and disgusting. Angela is able to take care of her child by relying on the charity of the de Paul Society. Government administrators come to the McCourt's house and ask Malachy Sr.—supposedly for census purposes—about why he's unemployed, along with other similar questions. Angela asks the census takers for boots for her children, but the men reply that this isn't their job.

In school, Frank and his brother are the poorest students by far—sometimes, they don't even wear boots. Frank's teachers yell at his peers for teasing him, and point out that even Jesus Christ couldn't afford boots. Over time, Frank becomes more familiar with the rules of Christianity. He prays to Christ and celebrates Easter by going to Mass with his father.

In the spring, Malachy Sr. gets his first job in months—at a cement factory. Angela is overjoyed, because she won't have to wait at the de Paul Society to collect charity. Still, Malachy Sr. has to leave for work very early every day—around 6 am. On the first Friday after Malachy Sr. gets his new job, the entire family waits for him to come home with money and food. Hours pass, and Angela begins to cry—her husband still isn't home. Suddenly, Frank hears his father's voice, singing a loud, drunken song. Malachy Sr. staggers into his home, shouting about dying for Ireland. Soon afterwards, he oversleeps and loses his job.

Malachy Sr. is both a victim of Irish social tensions and the architect of his own misery. The prejudices against Northerners certainly make it difficult for him to find work, but his alcoholism and mental instability also endanger his work opportunities. It's painfully ironic that Malachy Sr. seems so devoted to dying for Ireland, considering that his own countrymen refuse to help him out in his time of need, and his time in Ireland has seemingly brought him nothing but misery. The children dream about an "exotic" place like Italy, where they imagine that it is always warm and dry—the opposite of Ireland.



The McCourts, in the depths of their poverty, train themselves to find happiness in small moments. Even when they're cold and poor, they find ways to celebrate Christmas.



It's remarkable that the McCourts continue giving birth to children in their time of extreme poverty, as they have too many mouths to feed as it is. But Catholicism dictates that parents must not use birth control of any kind (and also encourages people to have large families). It's almost amusing when the census takers ask Malachy about his financial situation, as by now we can see how much more there really is to Malachy's story. Here, for example, we see an instance of him being a good father—essentially keeping his child alive with his own breath.



Even though Frank is poor, there's a kind of camaraderie in his financial situation. The schoolmasters in school protect Frank from bullying and teasing, as they (like many of the generous adults in his life) probably pity him and sympathize with his situation. Frank begins to get a sense for the ubiquity of Catholicism in Limerick life.



Malachy Sr.'s life is a pattern of endless attempts and failures—every time he says he's going to sober up and get a job, he fails spectacularly. Whenever he embarks on a new mission, Malachy Sr. seems to genuinely believe that he'll succeed in his aims, even when he seems doomed from the start. As ever, Frank's "voice" is understated—he doesn't express his outrage, but the outrageousness of the situation is apparent enough.



CHAPTER 4

It's nearly time for Frank, who is now seven years old, to take his First Communion—in other words, to become a true Catholic. To do this young boys must memorize the catechism (a series of questions and answers about Catholic doctrine). To study, Frank relies on his neighbor, Mikey Molloy, who's a few years older than he. Mikey reads a great deal, and also suffers from fits. Frank also knows that Mikey's mother, Nora Molloy, is a friend of his mother's. Nora sometimes goes to the local asylum to escape from her husband, Peter Molloy, who is supposedly a champion drinker. Mikey is rumored to have a brilliant memory.

Frank goes to talk with Mikey about the catechism. Mikey sits in the streets, reading a book. Frank remembers that Mikey himself never took Communion, because the priests couldn't risk Mikey having one of his "fits" and choking on the wafer. Nevertheless, Mikey is happy to answer Frank's questions—Mikey claims to have read enough about Catholicism to be an authority on the subject. He explains that each child gets a "collection" on Communion Day—a small quantity of money. Mikey adds that because he never took Communion, he's not a real Catholic, and thus he can do whatever he wants.

In school, Frank is trained in the Ten Commandments, the Seven Virtues, and other information he'll need for his Communion Day. The master, Benson, quizzes students on the Commandments and beats them if they forget the information. The children practice taking Communion by swallowing bits of paper. Frank finds that he can memorize information easily, and never makes mistakes. In the evenings, he spends time with Malachy Jr. and Mikey. He realizes that the Molloy's are just like his family—complete with a drunk father who's never at home. Mikey, like Frank, knows all about the life of Cuchulain, and together, the two of them tell Cuchulain stories to Malachy Jr. Mikey also tells Frank a "dirty" story about a pissing contest featuring Cuchulain's wife.

On Confession Day, the young boys of the neighborhood are assembled and sent to church. There, they have their first confession. Inside the confession box, Frank sees a large crucifix. He confesses his sins to the priest: he stole a penny, and listened to a story about Cuchulain and a "pissing contest." The priest claims to be shocked that Frank heard the story from Mikey, who read the story in a book—the priest insists that books can be a source of evil.

As the memoir goes on, it's increasingly obvious that Catholicism occupies a central role in the characters' lives. To be an adult in Limerick is to be a confirmed Catholic—thus, it's an important rite of passage for everyone in Limerick to take communion. While communion represents the importance of community and the group in Limerick, the communion ritual is also an early opportunity for Frank to exercise his own intelligence by memorizing the prayers and catechism.



Bizarrely, a simple physical problem in Mikey makes it impossible for Mikey to become a Catholic—and thus impossible (supposedly) for his soul to go to heaven. Ironically, though, Mikey is an "expert" on Catholicism. Although Frank isn't aware of it now, Mikey is something of a role model for him: Mikey proudly accepts that he's different from the people around him, and celebrates this by strengthening his knowledge and intelligence.



McCourt doesn't skimp on details of the memorization process, and there's a good reason for this: being a Catholic is a central part of life in the Limerick community. In other words, it's of paramount importance that every single child in Limerick memorize the Catholic rites and rituals, until they're as much a part of their existence as the multiplication table. Through his friendship with the older Mikey, Frank starts going through other "coming of age" rituals, like hearing dirty stories and having his idols de-idealized, even as he's also learning his catechism.



McCourt establishes a conflict between the dictates of the Catholic church and Frank's own desire to learn, read, and tell stories. The Church wants to control what stories matter, and generally limit them to the stories of the Bible. For Frank to develop an interest in other stories, such as those of Cuchulain, is something of a threat to the church's authority.



On Communion Day, the children wake up early. Frank, however, oversleeps. He's rushed to church, excited for communion because Mikey has told him that in the evening, his parents will take him to the cinema. Frank takes the traditional wafer, and swallows it without problem. Later, Frank goes to eat breakfast with Margaret Sheehan, his grandmother. He's so excited that he throws up his breakfast. Furious that Frank has "thrown up Christ," Margaret sends Frank back to church for another confession. When Frank explains what he's done, the priest tells Frank to tell Margaret to wash Christ away with water.

In the evening, Margaret Sheehan, still angry about Frank's "sinful" vomiting, forbids Frank to see a film at the cinema. Because of Frank's sickness, he's missed the collection as well—he has no money to see the film. Angela takes Frank to the cinema, hoping that he'll be allowed in without money. At the cinema, Frank finds Mikey. Mikey offers to create a diversion—he'll fake a fit, allowing Angela and Frank to sneak into the theater without being seen. Angela is a little skeptical that this is the right thing to do, but Mikey points out that he's not a real Catholic, and thus can sin as much as he wants.

CHAPTER 5

After Frank's vomiting, Angela and Margaret Sheehan barely talk—Angela is furious with her mother for being so harsh to Frank. Frank begins to notice that everyone in Limerick has a policy of "not talking to someone else," as there are so many rivalries and family feuds. Many of the people in town don't talk to Malachy Sr. because he's from Northern Ireland.

Margaret Sheehan gets word that a man named Bill Galvin needs a place to stay. Bill has a good job, and has a reputation for being a decent man. He stops by Margaret's home one afternoon, and points out that Margaret would have to take down a statue of the Virgin Mary if he were to live there—he adds that he is a Protestant. Margaret is at first reluctant to do so, but after Bill explains that his wife—a Catholic—hung Virgin Mary statues everywhere, she gives in. Bill begins living in Margaret's home, paying a weekly rent.

This scene is both comical and serious—we get the sense that Frank was miserable at the time, but now, decades later, he can see the humor in his situation. Margaret's dogmatic belief in the sacredness of communion leads her to yell at Frank for throwing up. It's plain that McCourt, in retrospect, finds this ridiculous: a child shouldn't be punished for throwing up. Amusingly, Margaret seems even more dogmatically religious than the priest, who, based on his response, may have had to deal with this situation before.



The more miserable Frank becomes due to Margaret's punishments, the more absurd Margaret herself seems. Her willingness to blame a child for being sick—as if the child wanted to throw up—makes her seem utterly oblivious to the real world. Mikey's jaunty insistence that he's not a real Catholic sounds almost like an invitation to Frank—if Catholicism means being punished for throwing up, then it's hard to imagine him wanting to be a Catholic.



As Frank grows older, he becomes more conscious of the rivalries and social tensions—most of them petty—in his community. He's old enough to recognize these rivalries, but not old enough to feel himself to be a real part of any one rivalry.



Although Margaret is clearly a very strict Catholic, she's not unreasonable when it comes to dealing with non-Catholics. She's downright gracious to Bill Galvin, allowing him to take down the Virgin Mary statue in her house (although there's also the fact that she's going to make money off of him). Based on the last few chapters, it seems that Margaret is harsher to lapsed Catholics or poor Catholics (like Frank, supposedly) than she is to outright non-Catholics like Bill.



Margaret Sheehan offers to pay Frank six pence a day for bringing Bill his dinner. Frank is reluctant to accept, but Angela insists that he do so—the McCourts need the money. Every day at noon, Frank brings food for Bill. One day, Frank is so hungry that he eats Bill's food—bacon, potatoes, and cabbage. He tells Bill that a dog snatched the food from him while he was walking over—a lie that Bill sees through immediately. Bill sends Frank to tell Margaret exactly what he did. Margaret is furious when Frank tells her. She hits him hard on the head, and sends him back to Bill with more food.

Although money is tight among the McCourts, Angela and Malachy Sr. always find the cash to buy cigarettes. Angela's teeth get worse and worse, to the point where her gums bleed horribly. When some of her teeth fall out, she goes to buy false teeth at the local hospital. The false teeth, which she wears for the rest of her life, fit badly, and make her mouth "clack." One evening, Malachy Jr. steals the false teeth and sticks them in his own mouth—but then finds he can't remove them. His parents have to rush him to the hospital to remove the false teeth. While at the hospital, doctors notice that Frank has an odd habit of keeping his mouth open, and they realize that he needs to have his tonsils removed.

Shortly after he has his tonsils removed, Frank goes to learn how to dance, sent by his mother. At a local dance hall, Angela forces Frank to practice dancing steps with other young boys and girls every Saturday. Word gets out that Frank dances, and soon the other boys are whispering that Frank is a "sissy." Frank tries to sneak out of his lessons to go to the movies. One Saturday, Malachy Sr. catches him, and sends him to church to confess. The priest tells Frank that he's a "hooligan" for going to the movies.

Years pass, and Frank is now almost ten years old. A local boy, Brendan Quigley, tells Frank that he should join the boys' division of the Arch Confraternity. Quigley explains that everyone in Limerick is a member of this old, Catholic organization, which helps its members get jobs and find wives. Soon after, Frank begins attending Confraternity meetings on the weekends. At the meetings, the priests lecture the boys about the importance of Catholicism—the lectures are very dull.

Frank's coming-of-age is in no small part the story of how he finds ways to support himself. Frank's success in taking a part-time job makes it even more pathetic that his father couldn't do the same. Frank tells an obvious lie here and is disloyal to his "employer," but it's also easy to sympathize with the starving child. Although Margaret's behavior in this scene may seem harsh, corporal punishment was the norm for most of the world at the time.



Angela is not free from addiction herself, and she (like Malachy Sr.) sometimes allows her addiction to overcome her compassion—it's suggested here that she spends money on cigarettes that could be used for food. By comparison to Malachy's drinking, of course, Angela's cigarette use seems downright minor, but it's important to note that Angela isn't free from her own "sins." For Frank and his peers, medical care is spare and intermittent—if Frank gets medical treatment at all, it's usually the result of a lucky accident, rather than a specific doctor's visit.



As Frank grows up, he develops a sense for what it means to be a man, an Irishman, and an Irish Catholic. At this point, Frank doesn't seem to be modeling his life after his society's definition of masculinity or piety, but nevertheless, he's aware of what the concepts of masculinity and piety are. McCourt suggests that masculinity is often the result of teasing and peer pressure, rather than any natural process of development.



McCourt jumps ahead by three years in only one sentence, reflecting the monotony of Frank's life. In a way, Catholicism itself is a close-knit club in Frank's community, and even in his country. Catholics help each other out (the de Paul Society, for example, is named after a Catholic saint and intended to help poor Catholics), and even arrange for each other's marriages. In this sense, the Confraternity is a microcosm for the Irish Republic itself.



Malachy Sr., who's been watching Frank's progress at the Confraternity with some interest, tells Frank that he should become an altar boy soon (Malachy Sr. himself was once an altar boy). With his father's help, Frank practices Latin and the rituals of Catholicism. Malachy Sr. takes Frank to the church and explains that his son is prepared to become an altar boy. The priest, a man named Stephen Carey, explains, irritably, that there's no room for another altar boy. Afterwards, Malachy Sr. never mentions the matter again.

Frank doesn't have many opportunities to demonstrate his talent or intelligence, but when he does, he impresses others. Even Malachy Sr., who's often oblivious to other people, can see that his child is talented. Yet it's likely that Malachy's presence in this scene is what prevents Frank from being admitted to the church—Stephen Carey takes one look at the alcoholic Northern Irishman and turns his son away.



CHAPTER 6

Frank is in 4th form at school, and his teacher is Mr. O'Neill. O'Neill—or Dotty, as he's nicknamed—is a strange man, alternately angry and kind. He praises Brendan Quigley for being curious about Euclid (the “father of geometry”) and mathematics. O'Neill urges the children to celebrate Euclid for bringing the Western world “grace and elegance.”

O'Neill's manner is a striking departure from what we've seen in the other characters in the memoir. Instead of stressing the importance of Catholicism, he celebrates the study of mathematics, and seems to have a wider view on the rest of the world.



The day after O'Neill praises Euclid in front of his classes, the students are surprised to find O'Neill being chewed out by his superior, Mr. O'Dea, for teaching the children information intended for older students—Euclid doesn't come until a couple years later in the curriculum. O'Neill continues to teach his students in an unorthodox way, however. He quizzes his class on religion, history, and current events, and calls students foolish if they get the questions wrong.

Frank is clearly fascinated by Mr. O'Neill, and it's not hard to see why: O'Neill is another outsider, clearly at odds with his peers and his superiors at school. Frank has always been interested in outsiders in one form or another, whether it's his own father, Mikey, or O'Neill.



One day, a student named Fintan Slattery gets a question right, and O'Neill rewards him with pieces of apple. Fintan asks if he can give away some of his apple to his “friends,” Frank, Brendan Quigley, and Paddy Clohessy. Frank is embarrassed by this, since Fintan is unpopular and often bullied—to be associated with Fintan is an invitation for more bullying. At lunch, Fintan offers to take Frank, Brendan, and Paddy to his flat. There, Fintan tells Frank that today is the day of his patron saint, Francis. Fintan's mother offers the boys cheese sandwiches—this is the first time Frank has ever had a sandwich of any kind. Fintan tells his “friends” that he enjoys looking at them, a statement that confuses Frank greatly.

Consistent with his behavior in the earlier chapters of the book, Frank is reluctant to belong to a “group”—in this case, the group of Fintan's supposed friends. Frank's priority at this point is keeping safe, and he knows that if he's grouped together with Fintan in his peers' imaginations, then he'll be bullied even more. And yet there's also an upside to befriending Fintan, as he gets some good food. Fintan is, as far as we can tell, a completely good character—generous, kind, etc., so it's telling that he seems so out of place in Limerick. It's also heavily implied that Fintan is homosexual, something that's taboo in the pious Catholic town of Limerick.



Several days later, Fintan invites Frank and Paddy to his house for another meal. They accept, since they're very hungry, but at Fintan's house, they're not given any food. Annoyed, Frank and Paddy leave Fintan's house. Instead of going back to school, they cut through a cow farm and end up running in the rain. Suddenly, Brendan Quigley comes running to Frank, saying that O'Neill has sent a note to Frank's house, explaining that Frank skipped school in the afternoon. Rather than go home, Frank decides to go to Paddy's house. There, Frank meets Mr. and Mrs. Clohessy. Mr. Dennis Clohessy, who's suffering from a serious case of tuberculosis, remembers dancing with Angela years before at a dance.

Frank ends up spending the night at Paddy's house. Early the next morning, there's a knock at the door. It's Angela, who's gotten O'Neill's note about Frank's truancy. Dennis greets Angela, who's furious with Frank—but soon, Angela and Dennis reminisce about dancing years before. In the middle of their conversation, Angela begins coughing heavily, and Dennis joins in—they both have weak chests. After some more talk, Angela leads Frank out. The chapter ends, "I'm very sorry for the Clohessys and all their troubles but I think they saved me from getting into trouble with my mother."

CHAPTER 7

Malachy Sr.'s drinking continues. He collects his unemployment benefits, then goes to spend almost all of it at the bar. When Frank is nine years old, he spends most of his free time with his friend, Mickey Spellacy. Mickey's family members keep dying of consumption, and Frank is jealous that Mickey gets a week off from school every time a new loved one dies. One year later, McCourt notes, Mickey himself would die of consumption.

Margaret Sheehan tells Angela that Frank is now old enough to begin working for the family. Angela protests that Frank is still in school, and needs to learn, while also staying in the Confraternity. In the end, Margaret wins the argument, and Frank goes off in search of odd jobs. He ends up working for his feeble-minded uncle, Patrick, delivering mail. One day, Frank delivers mail to an old man named Mr. Timoney. Timoney, who remembers Frank's mother and grandmother, asks Frank to read to him for money. Frank accepts, since he's eager to make another 6 pence.

Like so much of Angela's Ashes, Fintan's behavior is never satisfactorily explained to us. Frank begins to better understand his mother as a complex human being when he realizes that Angela had an entire other life before she married Malachy Sr. and had kids. She could, presumably, have married any number of other people, including Dennis. This reminiscence is rendered especially poignant by the fact that Dennis is sick, and may even be dying, never to dance with Angela again.



Frank is, in a word, "frank" about his reasons for doing things. Here, for instance, he doesn't dance around the facts: he's glad that the Clohessy's misery saved him from punishment. More to the point, however, we see that Angela and Dennis have a "history" together—Angela knew Dennis well, and seems to have had feelings for him before she married Malachy Sr. Tragically, the only bond left between them now is their suffering, symbolized by their similarly rattling coughs.



As with the end of the last chapter, Frank is remarkably frank when he discusses death and misery—he's been surrounded by these things for so long that they're almost banal to him now. The deadpan way that Frank reports his friend's death also reminds us how humor—even if it's bitter, sardonic humor—is the last defense he has left.



In this section, we get a sense for the "smallness" of life in Limerick. We've already met Patrick, pages ago, when Frank described how Patrick's father dropped him on his head. Similarly, Mr. Timoney already knows Frank's entire family, it would seem. The older Frank grows, the more apparent it becomes that everyone else knows each other already.



The next day, Frank goes to Mr. Timoney's house to read him "A Modest Proposal" by Jonathan Swift. Frank reads the story, and when he's finished, Mr. Timoney asks Frank what he thinks of eating babies. He gives Frank 6 pence and sends him on his way, saying he should come next Saturday. At home, Angela explains that Mr. Timoney is a slightly odd man, but good-natured.

Jonathan Swift's story sarcastically proposes that the Irish should solve their hunger problems by eating their own children, thereby killing two birds with one stone. Frank seems attracted to Mr. Timoney's eccentricity, his darkly whimsical sense of humor, and his outsidership in a community that's often too tightly knit for Frank's taste.



Soon afterwards, Frank has a run-in with Declan Collopy, a boy at the Confraternity. Declan says that Frank needs to give up his job at once—he's destroying the Confraternity's perfect attendance record. Frank is so furious with Declan that he hits Declan—an older and stronger boy. They fight, and Frank is injured, but he's proud of himself for standing up for himself.

In contrast to Mr. Timoney's outsidership, Frank here gets a nasty reminder that the closeness of the Limerick community has its downsides—anyone outside the group is automatically an enemy. Frank proves that he's growing up, as he's willing to stand his ground and defend himself instead of giving in.



At his next meeting with Mr. Timoney, Frank reads Timoney more stories. Timoney is an odd man, and Frank feels comfortable talking to him. This goes on for a few more weeks. Then Patrick tells Frank that he'll have to find other work—there's just no need for a mail delivery boy at the moment. Soon afterward Mr. Timoney is taken away to a nursing home, and Frank goes back to being unemployed. Nevertheless, Frank still goes to read to Mr. Timoney at his old folks' home when he has the chance.

Frank's interests in both social outsiders and in reading are confirmed when he agrees to keep working for Mr. Timoney, even after he has no financial motive for doing so. He reads to Timoney because he wants to understand someone who's lived in Limerick all his life, and yet clearly doesn't fit in with the rest of the people in the city. This suggests that Frank is feeling uncomfortable and claustrophobic, and is looking for a way to escape.



In July, Frank is startled to learn from his parents that Angela has given birth to a new baby—he now has three siblings, Malachy Jr., Michael, and the new child, baptized Alphonsus Joseph or "Alphie." Malachy Sr.'s father sends 5 pounds to help with the child. Angela tries to ensure that Malachy Sr. doesn't spend the money on beer. She tries to find him on Saturday night, and sends Frank to as many pubs as possible. Angela wants Frank to shout (when he finds his father) for the entire bar to hear, "that five pounds is for the new baby." Frank searches for hours. He sees a drunken man passed out in the streets with a plate of fish and chips in front of him. Starving, Frank eats the fish and chips.

Amid all the financial setbacks affecting the family, Angela and Malachy Sr. continue to have children, even though common sense says that they have enough already. Once again, here we see the "Malachy Sr. versus the rest of the family dynamic." Now that Frank is older, Angela uses him as a weapon to humiliate Malachy Sr. into giving up drinking at least for one night. Evidently, Angela has run out of options—she'll use any means necessary to ensure that she has enough for her baby.



Frank realizes that since it's Saturday, he can go to the church to confess his recent sin. He goes to confession and tells the priest that he's stolen the fish and chips. The priest asks Frank why he doesn't go home to eat with his family, and Frank explains that he's been sent out to find his father, even though he's starving. The priest is quiet for a long time, and then says, "I should be on my knees washing the feet of the poor." He tells Frank to leave the church and "pray for me."

In this moving scene, it begins to become apparent that even the most devoted and pious members of the community have their doubts about their place in the world. The priest, it's implied, recognizes that he's failed in his mission: to provide aid and comfort to the poor on earth. This scene is a poignant way for McCourt to acknowledge that the strict emphasis on obeying the rules, piety, and strict codes of behavior often wind up being cruel and repressive.



Frank leaves the church, and finds his father singing drunkenly in a pub. He's not sure what to do, but he wants to kick his father in the leg—he's furious that his father is wasting the money. Eventually, he turns and goes home, where he finds his entire family, except for his father. He knows that Malachy Sr. will be home soon enough, drunkenly singing.

Frank is old enough that he's now absorbed the pattern of his life: Malachy Sr. goes off to drink, then comes home, drunkenly professing his love for Ireland. Frank's anger with his father is a sign that he's almost ready to begin earning his own money, planning his own life, and making his own decisions.



CHAPTER 8

Frank is now ten years old, and ready to be confirmed at St. Joseph's Church. He studies with Mr. O'Dea at school, preparing for difficult questions about Catholicism. Outside of school, Mikey Molloy laughs at Frank for being confirmed—he insists that Catholicism is a sham, and encourages people to foolishly “die for the faith.” Frank has a lot of respect for Mikey, who's now fourteen. Still, he's looking forward to Confirmation if only because he'll get some “collection”—money to spend on the movies and candy.

Mikey Molloy vocalizes some of the things that Frank has been implying for the last 50 pages. Frank doesn't believe that Catholicism in its entirety is a sham, but he recognizes that it often hurts the people it's supposed to help, and punishes people for things utterly beyond their control (Frank being hit for throwing up, for example).



Frank knows a boy named Peter Dooley, who the other boys have cruelly nicknamed Quasimodo, due to his hunchback. Dooley has ambitions of working for the BBC in London, since nobody cares how a radio announcer looks. The other boys, including Frank, offer to pay Quasimodo a shilling for every time he lets them peep at his sisters' naked bodies. Quasimodo is reluctant, but in the end he always accepts the money.

Even the young children in Limerick are strongly motivated by a desire to survive and prosper. Peter Dooley is so desperate to leave Limerick and move to London, it seems, that he's willing to betray his own family for some extra money. In the process, he breaks a cardinal rule of life in Limerick: valuing one's family above all else.



One night, Frank, Mikey, and some other boys go with Peter Dooley to see his naked sisters. While they're staring in the dark, Mikey has a nervous fit, and rolls around on the ground. Peter's mother, hearing noise, comes rushing outside. She calls for a doctor immediately, but also recognizes what Peter has been up to. She calls the boys' parents and tells them that their children have been bad. Angela and Malachy Sr. are furious with Frank for his behavior. They make him swear never to see Peter again.

It was inevitable that Peter Dooley would be punished for his actions, as Limerick is simply too small and close-knit for such a secret to stay hidden for very long. Even though Peter has been making money in the worst possible way—pimping out his sisters without their knowledge, essentially—there's also something poignant about the way his family instantly crushes his ambitions of escaping from Limerick.



The next day is Confirmation. Frank goes through confirmation without any problems, and afterwards he's excited to go to the cinema with the other boys. But suddenly, his nose starts bleeding. He throws up, and Angela takes him home to get some rest. The local doctor comes to check up on Frank. The doctor says that Frank is going through growing pains. Frank develops a fever and begins losing more and more blood from his nose—so much blood that he's rushed to the hospital and given a blood injection.

Whenever Frank is about to enjoy something in his life—a movie, for example—usually something bad happens that gets in the way of his pleasure. (Actually, McCourt has been criticized for exaggerating the level of misery he experienced as a child.) The doctor's diagnosis—“growing pains”—is ironic, since we've already seen many of the “pains” of Frank's adolescence: he's racked by guilt and confusion.



Frank spends days in the fever ward of the hospital. The doctors tell him he's developed typhoid, and when the news of this gets out, Frank is teased for being sickly. Nevertheless, the boys at the Confraternity pray for him to recover. Angela visits Frank on Thursdays—Malachy Sr., meanwhile, is supposedly working at Rank's Flour Mill. Frank makes a friend at the hospital, a girl named Patricia Madigan. Patricia is generous and kind to Frank, and she even gives him some of the candy her relatives send her.

In the hospital, Frank reads a book about the history of the English kings. Frank also learns songs from Patricia. He begins to look forward to every afternoon, when he eats lunch with her. Then, one afternoon, Patricia isn't at lunch. Frank learns from a hospital janitor, a man named Seamus, that Patricia has died.

Seamus gives Frank more books to read in the coming weeks. Weeks pass, and soon it is August. Frank isn't sure when—if ever—he'll be released from the hospital. At the hospital, Frank is given nutritious food and gets plenty of rest. He reads constantly, and especially enjoys the novels of P.G. Wodehouse.

In November, Frank is released from the hospital. Angela tells him that he'll have to repeat the 5th form with his brother Malachy Jr., since he's missed two months of school. Frank is glum about going to classes with his brother. One day, shortly after classes begin, a "miracle" happens. Frank finds a penny in the street. Although he wants to buy toffee with the penny, he decides to spend his money differently. He walks to the statue of St. Francis of Assisi (his patron saint) and prays for Francis to get him out of the 5th form, offering his penny.

One day shortly after Frank's prayer to his patron saint, Mr. O'Dea, the 5th form teacher, assigns the students to write a short composition. Frank's composition, on the subject of Christ and the weather, impresses O'Dea. Frank writes insightfully about the climate in the Middle East and in Limerick, and points out that if Christ had been born in Ireland, he'd have died of consumption before the age of 33. O'Dea is so impressed with Frank's work that he immediately sends him to the 6th form with his friends, Paddy and Fintan.

Even when Frank is potentially about to die—typhoid was a pretty serious illness at the time—life carries on without him. The rest of the family continues working and Malachy even gets a job to make up for the lost income from Frank's illness. Frank makes what seems to be his first real female friend in Patricia.



Frank continues his education while he's in the hospital—in fact, it's entirely likely that he's pushed to read and write more because he's in the hospital. Patricia's death comes as yet another tragedy in Frank's life—almost as soon as he makes a new friend, she is snatched away.



Frank's enjoyment of P.G. Wodehouse—an English comic writer who wrote almost entirely about the foibles of the British upper classes, while also making fun of the Irish and the Scottish—is an early sign that he's moving past the cultural limits of Limerick. Instead of naively despising the English as a whole, Frank is beginning to accept that there's a whole world outside of Ireland, full of things worthy of his admiration.



For one of the first times in the memoir, we see Frank voluntarily engaging in Catholic ritual. He's not confessing or praying because others are telling him to—rather, he's accepting the importance of Catholicism in his own private life. Perhaps the near-brush with death in the hospital has convinced him to take religion more seriously.



Frank's experiences in the hospital seem to have paid off—we sense that he wouldn't have written such a good composition if he hadn't been reading Wodehouse in the hospital for all those months. Even if Frank would never admit it at the time, Frank proves to his teachers that he's an intelligent student, and worthy of being in a higher grade.



In the 6th form, Frank studies with Mr. Thomas L. O'Halloran, and learns about history, math, and grammar. O'Halloran is sometimes surprisingly realistic about Irish history—for instance, he admits that during Ireland's wars with England, there was "cruelty on both sides." Frank has always been taught that the Irish were never anything but noble in warfare—now his schoolmaster is telling him just the opposite.

As Frank goes through the 6th form, he gains more perspective on his own life. He becomes more and more aware that his father is an alcoholic, and is endangering his entire family's safety. And yet Frank still loves his father. In the early mornings Malachy Sr. and Frank wake up before everyone else, and Malachy reads the paper and tells Frank about the dangers of Hitler, Mussolini, and Francisco Franco. Frank feels like this time spent with his father is special and secret. In the mornings, Malachy Sr. is a good father, but at night, he's a disaster.

Winter approaches, and the McCourt house becomes cold and dirty. Angela complains that the stench from the nearby toilet will kill them all. On Christmas, Angela sends Frank to eat dinner at the hospital where he stayed in the fall—they're offering food to recent patients, and Frank would be a fool not to collect a free meal in the middle of winter. At the hospital, Frank greets his old nurses, and eats a delicious dinner of turkey and mashed potatoes.

The next morning, Frank walks through the streets with his brother Michael. They pass by a stable, in which a horse is neighing and struggling with a group of farmers. Michael and Frank know from experience that the men are going to put down the horse by shooting it. Michael cries out for Frank to do something—to convince the men to let the horse live. Michael becomes so enraged that he tries to attack the men. They push him back, since he's only a young child, and proceed to shoot their horse.

Frank's education in Irish history reflects his growing discomfort with the small-mindedness of life in Limerick. The Irish are taught that their country is the greatest in the world, and that England is the worst. The truth, of course, is somewhere in the middle. It's a mark of the narrow-mindedness of Limerick that O'Halloran's lesson comes as such a surprise to Frank.



As Frank matures, he begins to see the world in more nuanced terms, perhaps encouraged by O'Halloran's example. Malachy Sr., as usual, is a contradictory and complex character, and Frank starts to better understand his complexities now. Frank can acknowledge that at times he shares a special bond with his father, but at other times he hates his father for keeping them in poverty.



Frank's stint in the hospital turns out to be a boon in more way than one: not only does it provide him with good literature to read, but it also provides him with a free meal for Christmas. Frank seems to feel no shame about accepting food for nothing—his hunger is a more powerful force.



In this concluding section, we see the tension between Frank and Michael's worldview and that of the adults in Limerick. Becoming a man in Limerick seems to involve becoming hardened and callous, and the two boys are still too young and compassionate to be "real men." Frank has matured considerably in this chapter, but he has a long way to go before he can call himself a man, at least in the way Limerick defines the word.



CHAPTER 9

The chapter opens with an argument between Malachy Sr. and Angela. Angela insists that she won't have any more children—Alphie is the last one. There's a sense in the McCourt family that things are changing. Angela refuses to have more children, and Malachy Sr. faces the reality of World War II. Because Ireland is a neutral country, Malachy Sr. doesn't have to fight. In fact, he could easily move to England and get work there, since so many young Englishmen are off in battle. In Limerick, many families have been sending their fathers to England, and in England, the fathers send back large sums of money. After much thought, Malachy Sr. decides to go to England after Christmas. He tells Frank that Frank will have to be the man of the house while he's off making money in England.

Shortly after Christmas, Malachy Sr. leaves for England by train. He promises to send his family lots of money. Even at the time, Frank senses that Malachy Sr. is leaving to find women in England, not just to make more money. At the train station, Frank wishes his father goodbye, and sees hundreds of other families saying their own tearful farewells.

Frank describes the weekly ritual of waiting for a telegram from his father. Every family in Limerick with a father in England goes to the telegram office on Saturday, hoping that they'll receive money before the end of the day. If the telegram doesn't arrive by then, the families have to wait an entire week to buy food. The first time they go to the office on Saturday, the McCourts don't receive a telegram.

Shortly after Malachy Sr. leaves, Frank develops an eye infection that makes his eyes look red and swollen. Frank goes to the hospital, where he's given eye drops to use every day. There, Frank reunites with Seamus, the hospital janitor, who's aged considerably. Being back in the hospital makes Frank think about Patricia Madigan, the girl who died. Frank also crosses paths with Mr. Timoney, who is at the hospital as well. Frank offers to read to Timoney, but Timoney insists that he's "past reading now." Frank finds this sad and begins to cry, further damaging his eyes.

Frank's vague understanding of Angela and Malachy Sr.'s disagreement reflects his own growing understanding of sexuality. Clearly, Malachy Sr. wants to keep having sex with Angela, but Angela knows that this wouldn't be a wise choice at all, as it would inevitably produce more children to feed. As McCourt frames it, Malachy Sr.'s choice to leave for England seems to stem from his juvenile desire for sex without consequences, rather than his mature recognition of the job opportunities abroad and his family's need for money.



We can sense that Malachy Sr. isn't going to send much money to his family, and that he's going to have sex with women other than Angela while he's in England. Frank continues to gain a wider view of the world, as evidenced by his perspective on the many farewells at the train station.



We know Malachy Sr. well enough by now that we're not surprised by his callousness—it always seemed inevitable that no telegram would come for the family.



The misery never ends for Frank and his family—as soon as he's recovered from typhoid, he's suffering from swollen eyes again. As with many of the other episodes, what was tragic at the time becomes somewhat funny in retrospect: every time Frank gets out of the hospital, he ends up crawling back—and this isn't always a bad thing, as the hospital provides him with warmth and food he often can't find at home. Despite his harsh surroundings and tragic life, Frank's childlike spirit hasn't yet been crushed, and he can still cry over the loss of someone else's hope and curiosity.



After a month, Frank is released from the hospital. He returns to his house. See after, he learns from a man who's come back from England that Malachy Sr. has been squandering his wages in England by drinking. Angela realizes that she won't be able to get charity from the de Paul Society for much longer, and it's increasingly difficult for her to convince her mother, to lend her money. She decides to go to Mr. Coffey and Mr. Kane at the Dispensary Office and ask them for relief benefits.

Angela takes her four children (Frank, Malachy Jr., Alphie, and Michael) to the Dispensary Office early one morning. She greets Coffey and Kane and gives her name. Coffey and Kane are reluctant to help Angela because her last name is McCourt—a Northern Irish name. After mocking her, they eventually agree to give her some money, but only on the condition that she refuses to accept anything from her husband. Angela promises that she'll only accept Dispensary money until the time when Malachy Sr. sends her money.

CHAPTER 10

Months pass, and Malachy Sr. sends no money to his family, even though he's rumored to have gotten a job at a munitions factory. Because it's cold and wet, the McCourts spend all their time in "Italy," the loft area of their apartment, where it's warmer. Meanwhile, Angela becomes deliriously ill. She's bedridden all day, and yells out for her dead children: Eugene, Oliver, and Margaret McCourt. Desperate and hungry, Frank steals two bottles of lemonade and a loaf of bread that he finds next to the grocery store while he's walking through the street. Frank is ashamed of what he's done, especially because the goods belonged to the owner of a local grocery store.

The next morning, Frank walks to school and notices a large crate lying outside near a building. The crate contains milk, bread, cheese, and marmalade. Frank carefully steals some of the food and shoves it under his jacket. He's amazed that no one in the street tries to stop him. Frank returns home and shares his food with his siblings. He gives Angela food, which she accepts, even though she's weak and delirious.

Ironically, Malachy's stint in England makes it harder, not easier, for Angela to feed her family, since Angela can no longer claim unemployment benefits. And yet unlike Malachy Sr., she doesn't give up here—she marches her children to the Dispensary Office. Angela is so desperate for food that she's willing to try anything.



Coffey and Kane's dismissive attitude toward Angela and her reminds us of the adversity that Malachy Sr. has faced in Limerick as a North Irishman. Angela is forced to choose between her husband and her community loyalties, and because her priority is taking care of her family, she chooses her community. Furthermore, she is forced to laugh along with the men who try to humiliate her, or else risk not receiving food for her children.



It's not explained how word of Malachy Sr.'s employment reaches Limerick (it's not like Malachy has lots of friends who could report on this), but the point is clear enough: Malachy is cutting himself off from the rest of his family. Frank is now forced to steal to feed his starving family—a real-life version of the classic ethical dilemma. And yet Frank doesn't throw all ethics out the window, as he still feels guilty about what he's done.



It's difficult to judge Frank too harshly for stealing food. He's stealing to help his mother and his siblings—a good reason for stealing if ever there was one. Furthermore, Frank's actions seem to be virtually victimless—he isn't endangering anyone's safety or health, since the food was probably intended for a prosperous family that could afford things like marmalade.



As the family eats, there's a knock at the door. Outside, there's a police officer named Dennehy. Dennehy explains that he's come to talk to Angela McCourt about why her children have been absent from school. Frank explains that Angela is sick and Malachy Sr. is in England, and Dennehy is surprised. Dennehy tells Frank to go to his grandmother to make sure that he and his siblings are taken care of while Angela recovers. Frank does so, and at Margaret Sheehan's house Margaret yells at him for being filthy. Frank leads Margaret back to his home, where Dennehy is still waiting.

At Frank's home, Dennehy explains to Margaret Sheehan that someone needs to take care of Frank and his siblings. Margaret agrees that Angela, who clearly has pneumonia, should be sent to the hospital immediately—in the meantime, Frank and his siblings should live with their Aunt Aggie.

Frank and his siblings go to live with Aunt Aggie. During their first afternoon in their new home, Aggie is sharp and cruel with the children—she douses them in cold water, explaining that this will clean them and “cure” their laziness. She forbids them from speaking unless spoken to, but also gives them tea and bread. After a time, Pa Keating comes home, and Aggie explains to him that Frank and his siblings will be living with them for a time. Pa Keating seems to find this amusing and agreeable.

As the days go on, Frank settles into his new routine with Aunt Aggie. Aggie feeds Frank bread and tea every morning, and then forces Frank to write a letter to his father about Angela's condition. Frank enjoys spending time with Pa Keating, who plays cards with the children. Frank imagines having had Pa Keating for his own father—they could have had a great time laughing and drinking tea together. Aggie, however, is usually furious with Pa Keating, and tells him that she can't stand the sight of him.

After a few weeks, Frank gets word from Aunt Aggie that Malachy Sr. is coming back from England to see Angela. Frank and his brothers go back to their home, where they find Malachy Sr. He explains that Angela is due to be released from the hospital in two days. Shortly after Angela is released, Malachy Sr. announces that he has to return to England. Angela is skeptical, and furious that Malachy Sr. has been living in England yet not sending his family any money. Malachy Sr. swears that he'll send money soon. Indeed, two weeks after he returns to England, he sends his family 3 pounds, which Angela uses to buy food. Nevertheless, there are no telegrams with money in the following weeks. People joke that Malachy Sr. has found a “tart” in Piccadilly. Frank doesn't understand what this means.

In typical form, Margaret can't see the forest for all the trees. She's so focused on one particular act of misconduct—Frank being dirty, throwing up, etc.—that she can't see the big picture: her extended family is dying of starvation. Margaret's obliviousness is infuriating at the time, but, as usual, slightly amusing in retrospect.



When the nuclear family is in shambles (Angela in the hospital, Malachy Sr. in England) the extended family swoops in to save the day and keep the children alive.



Aggie is a harsh, judgmental woman, much like Margaret. She tries to teach Frank and his siblings the “rules,” but the rules she stresses seem pedantic and pointless. Aggie seems to respond to the difficulties of life in Limerick by trying to exercise strict control over every aspect of her life.



Frank finds Pa Keating to be a welcome relief from his own father—he's like the good side of Malachy Sr., without the bad side. And yet there's clearly more going on here than meets the eye, and there are typical marital squabbles in the house.



In this section—one of the last times Malachy Sr. appears in the book—we're reminded of everything dislikeable about him. He seems sure that he's going to turn over a new leaf when he returns to Ireland, and yet within a few hours he's back to his old ways, drinking heavily and wasting his money. It's highly likely, given the rumors about the “tart,” that Malachy Sr. has found other women to sleep with in England, women who aren't confined by the Catholic ban on birth control. Frank's cluelessness about the meaning of the word “tart” reminds us that he's still a child in many ways, and the Catholic emphasis on sex-as-sin is a particular hindrance to his sexual maturation.



Frank takes on new responsibilities taking care of his younger brothers, while Angela looks for money and food. She begs outside churches, visits the Dispensary and de Paul Society, and asks people to lend her money. Sometimes, her efforts pay off and she's able to buy corned beef for her family. At other times, she's less successful, and can only buy potatoes. Whenever food is scarce, Alphonse, the baby, is given the best food. Frank is embarrassed for his mother, but he's glad to have food.

Angela is fiercely loyal to her family members, and she makes sure that the youngest and weakest of them (in this case, Alphonse, the baby) is fed the best. Times of crisis separate adults from children: in crisis, Malachy Sr. turns to alcohol, while his wife denies herself and becomes more generous. Frank's embarrassment at having a mother who begs is an early sign that he's not satisfied with a life of poverty in Limerick; i.e., he's going to turn to other methods of making money, both legal and illegal.



CHAPTER 11

The chapter begins with a description of the old trunk that Angela keeps in the house. The trunk contains important birth papers, Malachy Sr.'s English passport, the children's American passports, and a dress that Angela wore years ago when she enjoyed dancing. Frank looks at his parents' marriage certificate, and is surprised to see that his parents were married less than nine months before his birth. He concludes that he must have been born after a pregnancy of less than nine months.

This opening sets the tone for the chapters to come. As Frank grows older, sex becomes more and more concerning to him. For the time being, he isn't entirely aware of how sex works, or what the Catholic rules regarding sex are—he still assumes that someone can't become pregnant until they're married.



As the chapter begins, Frank is almost twelve years old, and Mikey Molloy is sixteen. Mikey is off to go to the pub—it's a Limerick tradition that when a boy turns sixteen he goes to the pub to have his first beer. Mikey invites Frank along for the celebration, and he's able to convince the bartender to let Frank in. At the bar, Mikey enjoys his beer while Frank sips lemonade. Frank asks Mikey about his parents' marriage—how could he have been born less than nine months afterwards? Mikey laughs and explains to Frank that Frank was clearly "conceived" before his parents were married. Frank doesn't know what this means, and Mikey has to explain the basics of the sperm and the egg to him.

Alcohol is clearly devastating for many members of the Limerick community, but it's also a part of daily life. Getting a beer at the pub on one's 16th birthday is, no less than the Catholic Confirmation and Communion Days, an essential part of growing up. Not coincidentally, Frank experiences an important "coming of age" milestone here when he asks Mikey about his parents, and winds up hearing an explanation of the "birds and the bees."



In the weeks following his talk with Mikey, Frank begins working for a man named Mr. Hannon, who takes care of horses. Hannon teaches Frank how to harness the animals, and praises Frank for being a quick learner—this makes Frank happy. Hannon leads Frank through the streets of Limerick, using his horses to deliver heavy packages and coal bags to the houses. As they walk, Hannon explains that he'd like to be in England, where the work is better, but unfortunately he doesn't have a "good pair of legs," and couldn't do enough manual labor.

As Frank finds more jobs, he also gets positive feedback from his employers, who praise him for his intelligence and quick thinking. It seems wholly unfair that Malachy Sr. is able to travel to England, where undoubtedly he's drinking and sleeping around, but Mr. Hannon, a genuinely hard-working man, is unable to do the same.



After work, Mr. Hannon takes Frank to the pub, where Frank finds Bill Galvin and Pa Keating. Hannon buys Frank lemonade, and gets a beer for himself. Frank notices that his eyes are very irritated—being around coal bags all day has made his eyes red. Nevertheless, Frank wants a permanent job with Hannon. In his spare time, he invents “blinking exercises” for himself to ensure that his eyes won’t be destroyed by his work. Frank continues working alongside Mr. Hannon. He notices that Hannon was right about his legs—sometimes, he can barely walk.

Frank is willing to sacrifice his own health and wellbeing in the interest of having a decent job. This shows that years of living in near-starvation have had a profound influence on his work ethic. Frank sees money as the ultimate goal (more important than his health or education), and is willing to push himself to make as much money as he can in order to support himself and his family.



Angela informs Frank that he must give up his job with Mr. Hannon, since the coal dust is destroying Frank’s eyes. Frank is furious—he’s been proud of himself for getting a decent job at a young age, and doesn’t seem to care that his eyes are weakening. Then, a few days later, Frank gets a surprise: Mr. Hannon has been taken off to the hospital—his legs have become infected. Frank goes to Mr. Hannon’s house, where he finds Mrs. Hannon. Mrs. Hannon tells Frank that Mr. Hannon will never be able to deliver coal bags again. She adds that he always enjoyed spending time with Frank, and even thought of him as a surrogate son.

Frank’s relationships with friends, loved ones, and casual acquaintances are always tainted by the possibility of death and disease—in other words, Frank always faces the chance of losing someone he cares about to a tragedy of some kind. While Frank can’t do anything about this, his best option is to savor the time he does have with these people. This is partly the purpose of the book Angela’s Ashes itself—to memorialize the friends and, in the case of Mr. Hannon, father-figures that Frank has lost or left behind.



CHAPTER 12

As the chapter begins, the McCourts have received a letter from Malachy Sr.—he’s going to come home just before Christmas. In the letter, he claims that he’s become a “new man.” Just before Christmas, the family goes to greet Malachy Sr. at the train station. The family waits for hours at the station (they have no way of knowing which train Malachy Sr. is taking). Finally, after hours, the last train arrives, and Frank’s father isn’t on it. Angela wonders if Malachy Sr. is still on the train, having fallen asleep. Frank angrily claims that his father is a drunk who doesn’t care about his family.

Malachy Sr.’s promise feels just as empty as his last few. It’s telling that the children almost never speak badly about Malachy, despite his obvious failures as a father—the children are supposed to respect their father no matter what. It’s a big deal, then, for Frank to finally speak out in front of Angela and voice the harsh truth about Malachy.



The next day, Malachy Sr. returns to Limerick with two teeth missing. He claims that he’s not drinking much, and adds that there are few jobs in England. Angela shakes her head and accuses her husband of drinking away his wages. This time, Frank and his siblings join in yelling at their father. Malachy Sr. says nothing, but leaves the house. He comes home later, very drunk.

At this point, the children no longer feel so protective of and attached to their father (who looks more pathetic than ever with his missing teeth), and so they can join with their mother in shaming and criticizing him. It’s important to note that divorce is forbidden in Catholicism, so that “escape route” for Angela is cut off as well.



The next day is Christmas. Malachy Sr. doesn’t eat much at the dinner—he claims he’s not hungry. Afterwards, he says he’s going to sneak back onto a train and travel back to London. He kisses his children goodbye and leaves the house.

Malachy Sr. cuts himself off from his family—he doesn’t even show his “good side” as a father before he tries to escape responsibility once again.



Frank observes the rich boys who live in Limerick—they go to different schools, and wear tweed jackets and warm sweaters. He can already sense that they're going to have good, successful lives while he and his brothers will end up working in factories or delivering mail. Frank also begins to pity Michael—he's too old to play with Alphie and too young to be close with Malachy Jr. or Frank. One of Frank's only comforts during this time is the radio that his neighbors play on Sunday nights. The radio broadcasts plays by Shaw and Ibsen, as well as Frank's favorite, Shakespeare.

Angela falls behind on paying rent. The rent collector threatens to evict the McCourts unless Angela can come up with cash soon. The collector then notices that a wall is missing in the apartment (the McCourts knocked down the wall to make firewood for the winter). Outraged, he tells Angela to move her family out in a week, and leaves.

Angela and her children go to stay with Angela's cousin, Gerard "Laman" Griffin. They sleep in different corners of the same room, which reeks of whiskey. Over time, however, Frank realizes that Laman is an intelligent, well-read man. However, Laman is sometimes rude to Angela—he forces her to clean his chamber pot. Laman takes Frank to the Limerick Library and shows him books on Irish history. Inspired by Laman's example, Frank begins visiting the library more often.

As Frank turns thirteen, several tragic events occur. Margaret Sheehan dies of pneumonia, along with a number of Frank's uncles and aunts—as a result, their children have to be sent to orphanages. Malachy Jr. volunteers to be a musician in the Irish army, and he's sent off to Dublin to study. Angela weeps that her family is disappearing before her eyes.

CHAPTER 13

Frank and his friends at school plan to go on a bicycling trip to the nearby town of Killaloe. Frank borrows a bike from Laman, and looks forward to his trip. In the meantime, he entertains himself by reading. He's especially fascinated with Butler's *Lives of the Saints*. He learns more about Catholicism by reading the books. He finds the concepts of intercourse and copulation peculiar.

Frank's coming of age is, essentially his recognition of his own place in the world. Here, Frank becomes conscious of how low on the totem pole of society he really is. One significant sign that he's getting more mature is that he thinks of his siblings' points of view—he tries to empathize with them and "walk in their shoes." Finally, Frank is shown nurturing his passions for art and literature via the radio.



Angela will resort to almost anything to keep her family warm and dry, even knocking down an entire wall of the apartment.



Laman is a somewhat puzzling character. Like Malachy Sr., he drinks, as evidenced by the smell of his house (though he doesn't drink as much as Malachy), and yet he's also intelligent and loves to read. Laman is an ambiguous father figure to Frank, embodying the qualities that Frank aspires to have (worldliness, being well-read), and also those he despises (drunkenness and anger).



McCourt alternates between slow, almost cinematic renditions of specific scenes from his life, and sweeping, fast-paced "recaps" of many such events. This section represents the latter: the death of Margaret seems to trigger several other important (and tragic) events in the family.



In this chapter, Frank begins coming to terms with his own sexuality. Not surprisingly, his first education in the matter comes from Catholic texts, which naturally inform him that sex is evil. For the time being, Frank is too young to understand sex in all its complexity.



In school, Frank does well. His teacher, O'Halloran, tells him that he has a sharp mind, and could make a good priest or politician. Angela, recognizing her son's intelligence, takes him to the local Christian Brothers School—a secondary school where many wealthy families send their children. Angela speaks to priests who run the school, and they assure her that there's no room at the school. Angela is upset, and she tells Frank that he must never let anyone “shut the door in his face” again. Frank replies that he wants a job, not more education. After he finishes at his current school, he'll have no more school to attend.

Frank discovers the concept of sex. He has wet dreams, and begins masturbating. In school, priests tell him that it's wicked to enjoy sex out of marriage. Frank confesses his sins to priests, who tell him that he must repent or go to hell forever. Frank struggles to understand how sex could be a sin, especially since his most pleasurable sexual experiences take place in his dreams, when he isn't in control of his thoughts.

As Frank's education draws to a close, priests attend his school and try to recruit students to become missionaries. Although O'Halloran urges him to go to **America**, Frank becomes interested in a missionary program with the Bedouin tribes. Frank convinces a parish priest to write him a recommendation letter. The priest claims that Frank, with his talent, could easily have gone into the program last year. Frank also needs a doctor's note to prove that he's healthy enough to travel. When he goes to a doctor, however, the doctor tells him to “go home to your mother.” As a result, Frank is unable to apply for the missionary program.

Frank is scheduled to go off on his biking trip to Killaloe tomorrow. That night, Laman Griffin comes home, very drunk. Frank reminds Laman that he'll need his bike for tomorrow. Laman angrily tells Frank that he's been neglecting his duties—Frank has forgotten to empty the chamber pot. As a result, Laman doesn't give Frank the bicycle. Frank, furious, says that Laman can't tell him what to do. Laman punches Frank in the shoulder and the head. Angela, who's been watching this scene, begins to scream. Laman snorts and then eats some fish and chips.

Like Malachy Sr. years before, Angela recognizes that Frank is a talented student, and tries to give him the best opportunities. But like Malachy Sr., Angela fails to help her child get a good education. It's possible that Angela is being discriminated against because of her poverty. It becomes clear that Frank will have to do something on his own to better his situation, rather than relying on his parents to help him out.



Here, Frank begins to have doubts about the virtues of Catholicism. These doubts were already apparent in the scene when Frank threw up on Communion Day, but they're magnified here—Frank can't understand why people should be punished for their unconscious thoughts.



Throughout his life, Frank gets reminders of his own intelligence: his parents praise him, as do priests and teachers. And yet for every reminder of his abilities, Frank also receives a harsh reminder of his poverty and his sickness. The doctor's dismissive attitude to Frank echoes the priest who refused to admit Frank to school: he's essentially saying, “You're too poor and pathetic to be successful at anything.”



Although McCourt doesn't offer much insight into what he was thinking in this moment, it's easy enough to surmise that Frank is angry about being forbidden from applying for the missionary position: he's furious that he's trapped in Limerick. Laman's reaction is, of course, excessive as well. For all of Laman's sophistication, he's also an angry alcoholic, and not much different from Malachy Sr.



Frank goes to bed, crying and angry. He dreams of leaving Ireland and going to **America**. As he climbs into his bed, he hears the sound of Angela walking to Laman's bed and lying down with him. That night, he continues to hear her crying and making strange noises. He recalls that Angela and Laman have slept in the same bed, "grunting, moaning," for a long time now.

McCourt offers few details, but Angela and Laman are clearly sleeping in the same bed, and presumably having sex. This suggests that part of Frank's anger reflects his confusion about sex and sexuality, and it also makes us wonder why Angela is doing such a thing—if she's actually attracted to Laman, or if she just feels obligated to sleep with him because he's providing her children with a home. This scene is also important because it shows, for the first time, Frank specifically longing to go to America.



Late at night, Frank wakes up, hungry. He goes wandering through the streets, hoping to run into an uncle or friend who can feed him. After a long period of searching, he realizes that he has no way of getting food. Then he sees his uncle Ab Sheehan. Ab, who notices that Frank has been punched in the face, takes him to his home. Inside, Frank sees the remains of a container of fish and chips, wrapped in newspaper. Frank is so desperate for food that he licks the newspaper, which is still stained with grease.

In this pathetic scene we're reminded of how hopeless Frank's situation is: he's poor and sickly, meaning that he stands little chance of leaving Limerick, in spite of his intelligence. This scene is arguably the low-point of the memoir: the scene when Frank realizes that no one is going to help him get out of Limerick—at best, Ab Sheehan will give him a place to stay. He'll have to do the hard work by himself.



CHAPTER 14

The next day, Frank wakes up in Ab Sheehan's house. Ab gives him money to buy bread, tea, and milk. At the grocery store, Frank thinks about his future. He'll have a job at the telegram office soon, meaning that he'll have his own money. He'll be able to buy newspapers and check out library books, and perhaps get his own place to stay.

As we begin this chapter, Frank seems like a changed man. After the low-point of the last chapter, Frank is now looking forward to his future: he has a job (something that wasn't on his mind in Chapter 13), and he's being taken care of by a caring uncle. As usual, in a crisis Frank falls back on his family.



For the next few months, Frank stays with Ab Sheehan. Angela and Michael visit him and ask him to come back to Laman's house, but Frank, still angry, refuses. He imagines making money for himself and giving it to Michael, so that Michael will be able to own a proper pair of boots.

Frank is stubborn, a sure sign that he's growing up and developing his own thoughts and feelings. He hates Laman for hitting him, and in broader terms, he hates Laman for being another version of Malachy Sr.: a charismatic but ultimately disappointing drunk.



Frank begins going on long walks. When he's alone in the forests outside Limerick, he masturbates—a sin he's afraid to confess to priests. Sometimes, when he walks around early in the morning, he's able to feed himself—the milkman offers him broken eggs, which he always accepts and eats raw. Sometimes he also steals bread, which deliverymen have dropped off in fancy houses early in the morning. Frank takes the bread home to Ab Sheehan, who accepts it without question.

Frank commits "crimes" in this section, but they're crimes only in a dogmatic sense. He's stealing food from people who don't really need them to survive: Frank's need is greater than theirs. Frank has already expressed doubts about the merits of Catholicism, but he'll continue to feel guilty about his own sexuality for a long time—clearly, years of Catholic education have made their mark on him.



Frank continues reading the *Lives of the Saints*. He learns bizarre, sometimes explicit details about the saints—details his teachers never shared. Saint Ursula, for example, supposedly allowed 11,000 people to be murdered instead of agreeing to marry a Hun. Frank becomes confused by God’s rules—it seems strange that Ursula could be a saint after allowing innocent people to be killed. He reads books about Chinese culture that discuss the free sexuality of the Chinese. The librarian refuses to let Frank read more than a few of these books, as she claims that the Chinese are an evil, “slanty-eyed” race.

Frank is about to turn fourteen. He’s found a job at the telegram office, which he’ll be able to start after his birthday. He prepares for his job by washing his clothes, which he’s stained from a wet dream, and grooming himself in front of a mirror. Because Frank is waiting for his clothing to dry, he’s forced to wear the only other clothing he can find in Ab’s home—an old dress that once belonged to Margaret Sheehan. The next morning, he wakes up to find that his clothes still aren’t dried—as a result, he’s forced to walk to the grocery store in his grandmother’s dress. Dozens of people giggle and laugh at him. During his walk to the store, Frank crosses paths with Aunt Aggie, who laughs at his ridiculous appearance. Nevertheless, when Frank explains to her that he’s about to begin a job and start making money for himself, she replies, “That’s more than your father would do.”

CHAPTER 15

Frank wakes up early on his fourteenth birthday—his first day of work as a man. He reports for work, wearing his freshly dried clothes. A woman at the office laughs when Frank shows up, and she explains that he’s not due to start until Monday. Embarrassed, Frank leaves.

Frank returns to the telegram office on Monday morning. There, he’s greeted by the woman who laughed at him, whose name is Mrs. O’Connell. She makes fun of his clothing, which, despite his best efforts, is still old and cheap-looking. There’s a group of other telegram boys at the office. Frank notices that many of them have brought waterproof capes to keep them warm during the day—the office doesn’t provide raincoats. Frank is nervous, since he hasn’t brought a raincoat.

Frank’s self-education through reading is one of the most important factors in leading him to question his Catholicism and his place in Limerick. He realizes that there are alternatives to the strict repressiveness of Irish Catholicism, represented by the supposed freedom of Asia. He also becomes aware of the prejudice and small-mindedness of his peers—their fear and hatred of the Northern Irish also extends to other races as well.



For the time being, Frank represses his sexual desires, aptly symbolized by his decision to wash his clothing, concealing the evidence of his embarrassing wet dream. He’s made a kind of temporary truce with Catholicism, and with his community—he’ll remain a resident of Limerick and work hard, at least for the time being, and he’ll continue to indulge his sexual desires while also confessing them and feeling guilty about them. It’s reassuring to hear Aunt Aggie, who’s always been harsh and even cruel to Frank, praising him for his hard work.



The clumsiness of Frank’s ambitions for prosperity in Limerick are made clear in this scene: Frank thinks he knows what he wants, but he’s still clueless about many aspects of life in his community (even something as basic as when to show up to work).



Frank thinks that his job as a telegram boy will help him overcome the disadvantages that have kept him from becoming a missionary: i.e., he’ll be able to make money and become prosperous. And yet Frank realizes right away that his job will also reinforce the social differences between himself and his peers: he’s clearly the poorest one in the office.



Mrs. O'Connell gives Frank a large pile of letters and telegrams to deliver to the city of Limerick. She explains that Frank will be walking—ordinarily, he'd have a bicycle, but there's been a shortage lately. Frank decides to begin his day by delivering a telegram to Mrs. Clohessy, his friend Paddy's mother. Frank goes to the Clohessy house, where Mrs. Clohessy greets him. She tells him that Paddy has moved to a pub in England, where he cooks for a living. Paddy sends his mother money every week. Dennis, her husband, has also gone off to England to work at a canteen. Mrs. Clohessy tells Frank that she has plenty of money, thanks to her son and husband's new jobs. She's happy to see Frank, and gives him money to buy candy.

At the end of his first week of work, Frank has earned one pound—"his first pound." He realizes that for the first time in his life, he can do whatever he wants—he could buy fish and chips and see a film, for example. He and Michael have a meal of fish and chips, and afterwards, they go to see *Yankee Doodle Dandy* at the cinema. In the coming weeks, Frank adjusts to his new work schedule. He walks miles every day, delivering all sorts of telegrams. Some of the telegram recipients tip Frank for his trouble, and some don't. The best tippers are widows, ministers' wives, and, ironically, the poor. The best areas for deliveries are wealthy neighborhoods, while the worst area by far is Irishtown. Frank slowly gains a reputation for being the "telegram boy" in each neighborhood of the city.

Frank is under strict orders to deliver telegrams and do absolutely nothing else. But there are times when Frank is tempted to help the people to whom he delivers messages. There's an old man who's too old and feeble to get out of bed—he receives money orders via telegram, but he can't cash them because he can't even leave his home. Frank also pays visits to the Spillane house, where Mrs. Spillane tries to take care of her two small daughters. She receives money orders from her son, but the money isn't enough to feed her daughters.

Michael begins spending more and more time with Frank, who is still living at Ab Sheehan's place. Eventually, Michael comes to live with Ab and Frank full-time. Soon after, Angela begins to spend more time at Ab's place, until eventually she's moved out of Laman's house too. Over time, it comes to the attention of the unemployment office that Angela's son has a job. As a result, she's cut off from her relief payments, and Frank has to give his weekly pound to his mother. Shortly afterwards, Malachy Jr. comes home from Dublin, claiming that he's "fed up" with blowing a trumpet in the army. He sleeps on the same mattress as Frank, Alphie, and Michael.

Frank is surrounded by people who go off to England and, it would seem, find successful careers there. Frank would like to do the same, except that he's been told he's too sickly to leave Limerick. McCourt invites us to notice the injustice in the situation: Paddy has gone off to England, despite the fact that Frank was a better student. It's also important to note that Dennis—who seemed to be on the verge of death earlier—has now gone off to work in England. Symbolically, McCourt suggests that the desire to travel and "start again" can be not only invigorating, but life-saving.



*It's telling that Frank spends some of his first pound on his brother, Michael. Frank and Michael aren't particularly close, but Frank knows very well that it's his duty as an older sibling to take care of the rest of his family—he's been doing so since he was a very young boy. It's also interesting that Frank sees *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, an early sign of Frank's desire to move to America (a desire which sets him apart from his peers, who seem to instead want to move to England).*



Frank faces the same challenge he's been facing for years: a conflict between morality and rules. Frank knows that he's supposed to obey his orders and never help the people he delivers telegrams to, and yet Frank also knows right from wrong: he knows that he should be offering to help the suffering people he meets. For now, Frank follows his orders, as he can't risk losing this job.



The fact that Michael and Angela follow Frank to his new home is a clear indication that Frank really has become the "man of the family" in his father's absence—his behavior dictates where the rest of the family goes. Malachy Jr.'s behavior in Dublin, by contrast, illustrates that he's still immature. Unlike Frank, he refuses to commit to a job he doesn't love—his ambitions aren't as clearly defined as Frank's.



At work, Frank bonds with the other telegram boys, such as Toby Mackey, by making fun of Mrs. O'Connell, a severe, humorless woman, and her equally cold colleague, Miss Barry. Toby is an ambitious boy—like Frank, he's seen American films, and he aspires to move to **America** one day very soon. He keeps a long journal of "facts" that he's learned—Frank admires him for being so attentive to details.

One day, Frank is given a bicycle and told that he's responsible for delivering telegrams to a neighborhood of the city where he hasn't gone yet. This neighborhood, Toby tells him, is home to the Carmody family—famous at the office for 1) having consumption and 2) giving big tips to telegram boys. Frank bicycles to the Carmody house, excited, but he falls off his bicycle and scrapes his back and shoulders. At the Carmody house, a young woman invites Frank inside to treat his scrapes. Frank is reluctant to walk inside, since he knows about the infamous Carmody consumption. In the end, however, he accepts the invitation.

Inside the house, the young woman, introducing herself as Theresa Carmody, tells Frank to take off his pants so that she can dry them. Theresa takes iodine to Frank's cuts. As she treats them, Frank can't help but feel aroused—Theresa is very pretty. Theresa notices Frank's erection, and strokes it. It's implied that Frank loses his virginity to Theresa that afternoon. Afterwards, Theresa cries—she's bleeding, since she's just lost her virginity, too. Frank is terrified that he's going to catch consumption from Theresa, but he's so excited that he doesn't care.

Frank continues delivering telegrams to the Carmody house (and having sex with Theresa) for the next weeks. One day he shows up to the house and finds Theresa's mother, Mrs. Carmody. Mrs. Carmody explains that Theresa has been sent to a hospital for her consumption. Frank rides his bicycle to the hospital, where he pretends to be Theresa's cousin. The doctors, not fooled, turn Frank away. The next Saturday, when Frank delivers a telegram to the Carmody house, he sees that black blinds have been drawn over the windows.

On Sunday, Frank goes to church. He senses that he's sent Theresa to hell—by taking her virginity, he made her sin. Furthermore, since Theresa had tuberculosis, she didn't have a chance to confess her sins before death. Instead of confessing, Frank leaves the church, and the next day he proceeds with delivering telegrams as usual.

The people to whom Frank is most attracted tend to be dreamy, thoughtful, intelligent, and ambitious—often ambitious for travel of some kind. Toby is another example of this type. Like Toby, Frank has lofty ambitions, he's intelligent, and he's attentive to details and facts.



This is a turning point in Frank's life, and he experiences it because of his employment as a telegram boy. The milestones of life in Limerick are almost without exception related to Catholicism or work. This scene marks the beginning of Frank's first real sexual experience, and it comes while on the job. We already know that Frank isn't supposed to linger at people's houses too long.



It's interesting to think about how much of Angela's Ashes unfolds "offstage." We're rarely given much insight into what Frank is feeling—how he feels about being poor, having a drunk father, etc. This scene is no exception—there's no description of Frank losing his virginity, just a "jump cut" to the moment immediately afterwards. Frank's emotions here—both horror and excitement—are indicative of how he'll continue to regard the episode for a long time. Catholicism has trained him to feel guilty about sex even as he secretly desires it.



Just as with Patricia in the hospital, Frank makes a new female friend (and here, seemingly, his first love) only to have her be quickly snatched away by disease. Frank almost seems cursed by the fact that he survives all his sicknesses and experiences—he stays alive, but only to watch those close to him die.



Frank is forced to practice a calculated stoicism after Theresa's death. His situation in Limerick is so dire—he has to save every cent he earns—that he quite literally can't afford to grieve all day. Frank has been trained in this form of stoicism for many years, especially by watching Angela.



CHAPTER 16

One day, Frank delivers a telegram to the Harrington family. Harrington is an Englishman, and his wife is dead. When Frank knocks on the door, Mr. Harrington answers—this is surprising, since usually Mrs. Harrington is the one at home. Mr. Harrington asks Frank if he's Irish, and when Frank assents, Mr. Harrington invites Frank inside. Inside, Mr. Harrington gives Frank a glass of sherry, which Frank reluctantly drinks. He tells Frank that he's going to show Frank what "you people" have done to his wife. Mr. Harrington shows Frank Mrs. Harrington, who is lying in bed, dead from tuberculosis. Angrily, Mr. Harrington yells that the Irish have spread disease to his beloved wife. Frank runs out of the house, a little dizzy from the sherry.

Frank returns to the telegram office. There, Mrs. O'Connell berates him for being so slow with his deliveries. She adds that Mr. Harrington has called her, claiming that Frank snuck into his house and stole sherry from him. Frank tries to tell the truth, but Mrs. O'Connell doesn't believe him—she fires him on the spot. When word gets out that Frank has stolen sherry, an anonymous parish priest sends Mrs. O'Connell a letter, asking her to take Frank back. O'Connell says that Frank will be allowed to work for the office until he's sixteen—afterwards he'll never be allowed in the office again.

Frank is devastated that he's going to lose his only source of income when he's sixteen, and he still feels guilty about having sex with Theresa Carmody. A year has passed since her death—Frank is now fifteen years old. He contemplates confessing his sin to a priest, but he can't pluck up the courage to do so.

One day, Frank delivers a letter to a woman named Mrs. Finucane. She asks Frank if he can read and write, and he replies that he can. She explains that she wants Frank to write letters to her customers. Finucane sells dresses which she's purchased at a discount price. She needs someone to provide paper and envelopes, and to write threatening letters to her customers, who often fall behind on their weekly payments for the clothing. Frank wants this job badly, though he knows that he'll never be able to provide the paper and envelopes. After some agonizing, he steals paper and envelopes from a Woolworth's store. He isn't seen.

Mr. Harrington's actions in this chapter seem contradictory, but they make a certain perverse sense. Mr. Harrington hates the Irish, and yet he's also lonely—he wants someone to talk to, but he also wants someone to yell at. Thus Harrington invites Frank into his home to attack Frank's Irish heritage ("you people"). Frank, who's still thinking about Theresa's death by consumption, is understandably shaken by his encounter—he feels guilty, and can almost believe that he was responsible for Mrs. Harrington's death.



It's interesting that Mrs. O'Connell accepts Mr. Harrington's word over Frank's, considering that Frank is Irish, and Mr. Harrington, we can surmise, has made no secret of his dislike for Ireland. And yet there are those who trust and respect Frank, like the anonymous parish priest who saves Frank's career by arranging for him to stay on until the age of 16.



Frank is locked in a difficult situation: he respects the rules of Catholicism enough to blame himself for Theresa's death, and yet he's so beset with guilt that he can't bear to confess to a priest, as Catholicism tells him he must. Clearly, Frank thinks he made Theresa sin before she had a chance to repent, and thus condemned her to hell.



Frank's ambitions to make money lead him to some unusual careers. Here, for the first time, he's allied with a wealthy person, essentially threatening poorer people to pay their debts as soon as possible. Frank also proves that he's constructed a new moral code for himself. He steals, but only from places too big and prosperous to be seriously harmed by the theft—in this example, for instance, Frank's crime is essentially victimless.



Frank shows up at Mrs. Finucane's house, ready to write letters for her. In the coming days, he drafts many letters, in which he uses intimidating jargon to force the recipients to pay what they owe to Mrs. Finucane. Mrs. Finucane is grateful for Frank's help. She gives him money for stamps so that he can send the envelopes. Instead of buying stamps, Frank delivers them himself.

As Frank nears the age of sixteen, Mrs. O'Connell, who seems to have forgotten the episode with Mr. Harrington, suggests that Frank take the postman's exam, which will allow him to become a full-time postman. On the day of the exam, O'Connell arranges for Frank to be excused from work. He goes to take the exam, which is held at the Protestant Young Men's Association. As Frank waits in line to take the exam, he sees a sign across the street: "Smart boy wanted." Knowing that he would hate being a postman, Frank decides to ditch the exam and interview for the other job.

Frank walks into the building with the sign. Inside, he meets Mr. McCaffrey, who asks him to demonstrate his proficiency with sums and writing. Frank writes his address, saying that he lives on Little Barrington "Street." Mr. McCaffrey points out that Little Barrington is a lane, not a street—in other words, Frank lives in a poorer part of the city than he's letting on. Nevertheless, McCaffrey is impressed with Frank's steady handwriting, and offers him a job distributing newspapers.

When Frank returns to the telegram office, word has already gotten out that he walked out of the exam. Mrs. O'Connell and Miss Barry think that Frank believes he's "too good" to be a postman, and they say that he's a disgrace to his country. Frank says nothing, and leaves the telegram office, never to return.

CHAPTER 17

Frank turns sixteen, and goes to a pub with Pa Keating. There he drinks his first pint of beer, and talks with Pa Keating about his new job with Mr. McCaffrey. As the evening goes on, the men in the bar talk about the recent news: now that World War II is over, the Nazis are being tried for war crimes. Footage of the Holocaust was shown at Nuremberg, proving that the Germans were willing to massacre innocent Jews.

Frank is given a chance to show off his talents with writing and elaborate diction. He lacks a strong formal education, but he still finds avenues in which he can express his talents and develop them.



Frank has been settling into a role in his community, delivering mail to the people of Limerick—the most conventional, "Limerick" job imaginable. While he's making good money in this way, he's clearly dissatisfied with his life, and not just because of Theresa's death. Frank longs to take risks and try new things—the perfect example of this is his decision to sneak out of the post office exam and pursue his own career choices. This isn't to say that a career as a "smart boy" will automatically be an escape for Frank—rather, Frank's decision to skip out on the post office is admirable for the simple reason that he's exercising his independence.



Frank tries to use language to hide the fact that he's impoverished (we can see the same tactic in the overly fancy, elaborate letters he writes for Mrs. Finucane). In Angela's Ashes itself, however, he adopts the opposite strategy, writing about his poverty "warts and all" instead of trying to conceal it. Some time between the end of this book and the time when McCourt wrote his memoir, he decided to stop hiding his roots and write about them frankly.



The cold shoulders Frank receives after leaving the post office exam are very telling of life in Limerick. The people of Limerick reject anyone who's different from them, and anyone who wants to pursue a career beyond the beaten path is implicitly insulting the rest of the city, they believe. In a way, they have a point—Frank is dissatisfied with life in Limerick. And yet it's also small-minded and foolish to attack a teenager for trying to find his way in the world.



Frank is finally entering into the initiation ritual he'd seen Mikey Molloy participate in years ago. Meanwhile Hitler's actions in Europe illustrate the dark side of close-mindedness and regional pride (of the kind that Frank has been experiencing ever since moving to Limerick), and suggest that the world is changing quickly.



After a long night of drinking, Frank staggers home. Inside, he finds Angela waiting for him. Angela insists that Pa Keating should have known better than to let Frank drink so much. Frank yells that he can do whatever he wants now, but then he vomits all over himself. Angela weeps.

The next morning, Frank wakes up and ignores Angela. He goes to the statue of St. Francis, and realizes that he's given up on his patron saint, as Francis didn't help when Frank prayed for the life of Theresa Carmody. Frank begins to weep. Suddenly, a hand grabs him—it is Father Gregory, a local priest. He asks Frank to tell him what's the matter, as he sees that Frank is clearly suffering. Gregory urges Frank to repent his sins. Frank agrees to confess his sins before Saint Francis, with Gregory listening. Frank tells Francis about having sex with Theresa, getting drunk, and fighting with Angela.

After Frank falls silent, Father Gregory waits a few moments, then begins to talk to Frank. Gregory explains that Theresa has undoubtedly gone to heaven—she would have been provided with a priest at the hospital, and thus confessed her sins before dying. This surprises and inspires Frank, as he didn't know that Theresa had confessed before her death.

Shortly after turning sixteen, Frank begins his job with Mr. McCaffrey. He meets McCaffrey, who tells him that he'll be labeling piles of newspapers to indicate where they'll be delivered, and occasionally delivering them by himself. Frank will work with a team of boys around his age. There's Gerry Halvey, the messenger boy, who takes the labeled newspapers and delivers them, and Eamon and Peter, two delivery boys. One day, Gerry Halvey doesn't show up for work, and Mr. McCaffrey angrily tells Frank that he'll have to deliver newspapers that day. Frank delivers papers. Then, in the afternoon, Mr. McCaffrey tells Frank that they'll have to go back to every delivery spot. The paper that day has printed information about birth control, which is illegal in Ireland. McCaffrey and Frank travel to shops, tearing the offending pages out of every single newspaper, over the protests of the shopkeepers. Later, Frank makes a whopping eight pounds selling back copies of the article to curious people.

This is one of the darkest points in the novel—Frank seems to be turning into Malachy Sr., and continuing the cycle of alcoholism, poverty, and misery. It's a mark of the importance of tradition in Limerick that Frank drinks anyway, despite his first-hand knowledge of the misery alcohol can cause.



Throughout this chapter, Frank walks a fine line between embracing the social norms of life in Limerick and rejecting these norms for good. Here, for instance, he confesses his sins—participating in one of the most basic rituals of Irish Catholic life—and yet there's also a sense of finality in Frank's confession, as if he's finally shedding his emotional baggage he's been carrying around for a year.



It's remarkable, after Frank has fretted and worried about Theresa's fate for so long, that Frank didn't know this basic fact: Theresa confessed her sins before dying. It's almost humorous that there's such a simple answer to Frank's problem—if he'd just confessed months ago he could have saved himself a lot of worry.



Catholic rules dominate every facet of Frank's life. At the time it seems perfectly normal to Mr. McCaffrey, and perhaps even to Frank, to tear out every mention of birth control in a newspaper—in retrospect, however, McCourt captures the scene with dry humor, as if to comment on how absurd the practice is. Catholicism is a huge and complex thing, but as McCourt portrays it in Limerick at least, it mostly serves as a social force and as a source of guilt and judgment. In general, Frank bonds with other boys his age outside the confines of work or the church, makes money for himself, and—most importantly—gains a sense of independence and control over his own life.



Frank settles into his new job. He labels newspaper piles, and sometimes rides a bicycle to deliver them himself. He makes extra money in tips by delivering papers, and slowly, he saves money with the goal of moving to **America** one day. Meanwhile, Malachy Jr. gets a job working in a stockroom. Angela has begun a job taking care of an elderly man named Mr. Sliney. One day, Frank goes to visit Angela. They remember the cause of their argument years ago: Laman Griffin.

When Angela and Frank remember their disagreement, stemming from their life with Laman Griffin, they don't tearfully embrace or even apologize to each other—McCourt doesn't say anything about the scene after this point. Coupled with McCourt's description of Malachy Jr.'s new job, the message of this scene can be summed up as "life goes on." In Limerick, there's no time for big, tearful embraces or somber admissions of guilt.



Frank visits Mr. Sliney while he's seeing his mother. Mr. Sliney is very old, and near death. He greets Frank, about whom he's heard a lot from Angela, and mentions that he used to know Mr. Timoney, who's recently gone blind and died.

In this short scene, we're reminded of how much time has passed since the memoir began. With Mr. Timoney dead, Frank loses one of his last links to life in Limerick.



Frank continues with his job. In his spare time, he reads the newspapers, improving his reading skills. He continues thinking about Theresa Carmody, but believes that she's in heaven. As the months go on, Frank wins Mr. McCaffrey's respect for his hard work and attention to detail. Meanwhile, Malachy Jr. goes to England to work in a boarding school, but he's soon fired for his abrasive manner. He then finds work shoveling coal at a factory. Both Frank and Malachy Jr. dream of going to **America** one day.

By the end of this chapter, Frank's ambitions have crystallized. We'd sensed long ago that Frank wanted to travel to America, but now it's perfectly clear that he's saving money for this exact purpose. The characters who travel to England inevitably seem to come back (with the exception of Malachy Sr.)—perhaps in America, Frank will succeed more handily in building a new life for himself.



CHAPTER 18

As the chapter begins, Frank is almost nineteen years old. He's still working for Mr. McCaffrey and Mrs. Finucane, and thinks that he only needs a few more pounds before he has enough money to travel to **America**.

We open this chapter toward the ending of Frank's long struggle to raise enough cash to travel to America. We can imagine, however, the sacrifices he's had to make to achieve this end, and unlike many of the young men in Limerick, he hasn't blown all his money on alcohol.



The Friday before his nineteenth birthday, Mrs. Finucane, who's been employing Frank for almost two years now, calls Frank to her house to celebrate with a glass of sherry. When Frank arrives, he's surprised to see that his old employer is dead, her purse fallen on the floor. Frank opens Mrs. Finucane's purse, finds seventeen pounds inside, and takes them for himself. He also finds a key to a trunk, which contains one hundred pounds. He takes forty pounds for himself. Frank then notices Mrs. Finucane's ledger, which claims that Aunt Aggie owes her nine pounds. Frank leaves the house and throws the ledger into the river, sparing his aunt from the trouble of paying her dues.

This is Frank's biggest crime, financially speaking (40 pounds is the largest chunk of money we've heard of in the entire book), and yet it's also Frank's least serious crime—he's stealing from a woman who's already dead, meaning that he can't possibly be hurting her. McCourt is careful to note that he spares Aunt Aggie from some of her debts as well, meaning that Frank also accomplishes some positive good through his crime. Frank may be willing to steal, but he's not amoral—he's built his own moral code, according to which theft isn't necessarily bad, and it even has a kind of dignity in it (at least it's better than begging).



Frank uses his new money to arrange travel to **America**. He finds a travel agency that can take him to America by boat for fifty-five pounds. Frank tells Angela and his brothers that he's due to leave Ireland in a few weeks. Angela cries and says that they'll have to have a party for Frank before he leaves. In the old days, Frank thinks, the Irish threw parties for people who were going off to America. The parties were called American Wakes, because it was understood that the people going off to America would never be seen again.

Frank continues working during his last weeks in town. He takes walks through Limerick, trying to take mental photographs of the city in case he never returns. He begins having second thoughts about his journey—perhaps it would be better for him to wait until Malachy Jr. can come to **America** with him. But whenever Frank has doubts about his choice, he's able to reassure himself that he's doing the right thing.

Angela throws a party for Frank, saving up shillings from her work for Mr. Sliney. At the party, Frank's family attends, and sings him loud, boisterous songs. Halfway through the party, Aunt Aggie remembers that there's a lunar **eclipse** that night. Pa Keating says this is a good sign for Frank's journey, but Aggie insists that it's actually an unlucky sign.

The next morning, Frank is on a boat bound for **America**. As he sits in his room, he wonders what would have happened if he'd taken his post office examination and stayed in Ireland. He could have made enough money to pay for his brothers to buy shoes and go to school. But it's too late now: he doesn't know when he'll see his family again.

McCourt establishes how important Frank's trip to America is—it's not a "trip" at all, but the beginning of an entirely new life for him. To be sure, Frank is "laying to rest" one side of his personality: he's rejecting his strict Catholic upbringing, and the general mood of hopelessness that's long loomed over him. And yet the term "wake" is accurate in a different sense—Frank will be "resurrected" as a new man in a new country.



In this important moment of uncertainty, Frank struggles between his loyalty to his family and his desire to be free and independent. Throughout his life, Frank has worked hard to help other people, mostly in his family. It's a mark of Frank's newfound maturity that he chooses to go off on his own for once—yet this decision could also be seen as selfish, and McCourt leaves Malachy Jr.'s fate unclear.



The lunar eclipse is neither good nor bad, of course—it just is. By portraying the eclipse as an indeterminate event (good for some people, bad for others), McCourt is both suggesting the uncertainty of Frank's future and offering another reminder of the superstition and small-mindedness of Limerick. Yet this party is also Frank's "last hurrah" with his family—the people he has gone through so much with. He is leaving, and they are staying the same.



Frank's desire to go off to America on his own could be interpreted as heartless—he could be said to be rejecting his family after years of being taken care of. But it's also true that Frank is brave for wanting to leave Ireland. He refuses to accept misery and tragedy as the norm in his life, and he wants to start over on his own.



After days of travel, Frank's boat arrives in New York City. There's a delay with the ship's landing, and as a result, Frank is forced to spend a night in Poughkeepsie before sailing back to New York City. When he sets foot in Poughkeepsie, Frank is greeted by a local priest named Tim Boyle. Boyle invites Frank to a party for Irish immigrants. At the party, which Boyle claims is full of "bad women," Frank drinks strong beer and meets a woman named Frieda. Frieda—an American whose husband, Boyle reports, is away on his weekly hunting trip—takes Frank to the bathroom and then the bedroom, where she has sex with him, while the other women at the party pair off with other men from the voyage. Frieda asks Frank if he'd consider settling in Poughkeepsie instead of New York, but Frank says he wouldn't.

The clearest sign that Frank has turned his back on his old community's ways comes in this scene, in which Frank has sex with Frieda. Frieda is a somewhat mysterious character: Boyle says that her husband is off on a hunting trip, but we have no idea why (or if she's even telling the truth). Clearly she has a reputation for being sinful—hence Boyle's explanation that she and her friends are "bad women." (Given how the women single-mindedly go about having sex with the men at the bar, it's possible that some might be prostitutes). Frieda stands for everything that priests taught Frank to hate: she's seductive, and represents free sexuality. Thus, it's telling that Frank listens to Frieda, not the priest. Frank has been raised a strict Catholic, but here he symbolically rejects the guilt and repression of his upbringing and embraces the "freedom" of his new life. Boyle, by contrast, looks like a clueless fool—out of touch with the real world.



Late at night, Frank and the other immigrants return to their boat and sail from Poughkeepsie back down to New York City. On the boat, one of the officers asks Frank, "Isn't this a great country altogether?"

America, it could be said, is a great country because it allows people to behave as Frank is behaving: to turn their back on their old countries' ways and start fresh. Of course, at this point it's unclear if Frank's newfound freedom will be beneficial to him. We don't know if Frank will be able to find success and happiness in America—or if, as is often the case, the immigrant's idealized version of America is just an unrealistic dream.



CHAPTER 19

The chapter consists of one word: "Tis."

*In this famously ambiguous ending, McCourt seems to sum up his entire ensuing experience of America into one word. On one level, this seems like a pure affirmation of the question of the previous chapter—Mccourt seems to be saying that America is a great country, precisely because of the freedom and opportunity it can offer to immigrants like McCourt himself. On another level, however, some critics have argued that "tis" (especially after the pause of a whole new chapter beginning) is a rather half-hearted affirmation of this question. This suggests that Frank himself also feels ambivalent about his decision to leave his family and return to America, and implies that his experience there won't all be positive and uplifting. Indeed, McCourt's sequel to *Angela's Ashes* is actually called "Tis," and it details Frank's complicated, often difficult life in America.*





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