Angela’s Ashes Unit Plan
Year 12 – Analyse extended written text(s)

Duration: 4-5 weeks

Strand: Written Language

Sub-Strands: Reading

Links with other strands: Close Reading; Exploring Language; Transactional Writing

Achievement Objectives/Processes
- Close Reading
- Exploring Language
- Thinking Critically
- Transactional Writing
(Levels 7-8)

Learning Outcomes
By the end of this unit, students should have read a novel and be able to:
1. understand the make up of a novel;
2. understand and summarise the plot;
3. understand how setting and character are created;
4. understand the way the plot has been structured;
5. discuss and evaluate themes;
6. show an understanding of new ideas and vocabulary;
7. and write an essay answer about an aspect of the text

Activities
- Read novel
- Quiz
- Plot summary
- Close reading task sheets
- Discussion and notes on
  - setting
  - characterisation
  - themes
  - style
- Written answers

Resources
- Class set of novel “Angela’s Ashes” by Frank McCourt
- Unit plan as follows

Assessment criteria
English Curriculum Levels 7-8
NCEA Level 2, Achievement Standard 90377 (English 2.3) ‘Analyse extended written text(s)’.

Achievement criteria

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<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Merit</th>
<th>Excellence</th>
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| Analyse specified aspect(s) of extended written text(s) using supporting evidence. | Analyse specified aspect(s) of extended written text(s) **convincingly** using supporting evidence. | Analyse specified aspect(s) of extended written text(s) **convincingly and with insight** using supporting evidence. |

**How Achievement Standard is assessed**

Achievement Standard is assessed by an eternal examination. Students are advised to spend 40 minutes on the exam paper. They are to answer only one of the questions.
Pre-Reading Activities

Post-box questions/discussion

- Do you believe in God? Do you belong to a religion? If yes, tell me a little about why you pray/go to church/youth group.
- What do you know about Ireland?
- What is poverty, and who experiences it?
- What do you think of when you hear the words ‘social status’? What do you think the implications of belonging to a ‘lower class’ are?
- Have you ever been prejudiced against? What was it about? How did it make you feel?
- How important is family? What is the job of a mother and father? What do you think is a ‘positive’ family atmosphere?
- How important is hope? Explain.

Handing out the novel…and reading the novel

When handing out to students:

- Give clear expectations of timeframe for unit
- Encourage to read as much as possible in own time
- Encourage to keep piece of paper/bookmark whilst reading to jot down vocabulary that has not been understood
- Let students know when work will be starting after reading, so they know when to have the book read
- Positive comments only!
- Emphasise that vocabulary/understanding everything in the book is not overly important initially, as long as they have an idea of the storyline. This will only affect the lower ability students
Post Reading Activities

1. Use this diagram as a model to complete a summary of the aspects of ‘Angela’s Ashes’. Write the title in the centre of your diagram, and in each box, fill in the relevant details. Keep them brief.

**ASPECTS OF A NOVEL**

**PLOT**
- The story or narrative
- There may be a main plot and one or more sub-plots

**SETTING**
- In time = when
- In place = where
- In society = who

**CHARACTERS**
- Main characters
- Minor characters

**THEMES**
- The ideas the novel explores
- Any ‘messages’ suggested

**STYLE**
- The choice of words
- The way they are arranged
- The use of imagery, symbolism, dialogue, etc

**STRUCTURE**
- The order in which the story is told
- Point of view (who tells the story)
Initial post reading questions

- Did you like/dislike this text? Why?
- What impression do you get from the cover of the novel? What does it suggest the book is about?
- What is the significance of the title?
- “A book can provide a link to other lives, a window to another time”. Explain how this statement relates to ‘Angela’s Ashes’.
- What do you think are the main themes in the text?
- What character did you like best? Why?
- What character did you like least? Why?
- What do you know about the way Angela’s Ashes has been written (the style)?
- Why is setting important in Angela’s Ashes?
- What does this book tell us about hope and survival?
- What shocked you in ‘Angela’s Ashes’? Be specific; try to think of one part of the story.
- All stories are based on conflict; if everyone is happy and no one fights, there isn’t much to write about. What conflicts provide the basis for this story? Do other conflicts develop as the story goes along? Are these conflicts settled by the end of ‘Angela’s Ashes’? How?
- The ending of ‘Angela’s Ashes is satisfying. Discuss.
- Write down THREE questions that you would like to ask Frank McCourt (writer of ‘Angela’s Ashes’).
- Write a diary entry as Frank, 10 years on.
- Choose one word that you think describes this text and explain why you have chosen that word.
- Rate ‘Angela’s Ashes’ on a scale of one to five.
Discussion questions

1. Countless memoirs have been published recently, yet ‘Angela’s Ashes’ stands out. What makes this memoir so unique and compelling?

2. Discuss the originality and immediacy of Frank McCourt’s voice and the style he employs – e.g. his sparing use of commas, the absence of quotation marks. How, through a child’s voice and perspective, does McCourt establish and maintain credibility?

3. Ever present in ‘Angela’s Ashes’ is the Catholic Church. In what ways does the Catholic Church of McCourt’s Ireland hurt its members and limit their experience? How does the Church protect and nurture its followers? What is Frank’s attitude toward the church?

4. McCourt writes: “I think my father is like the Holy Trinity with three people in him, the one in the morning with the paper, the one at night with the stories and prayers, and then the one who does the bad thing and comes home with the smell of whiskey and wants us to die for Ireland”. Was this your impression of Frank McCourt’s father? How can Frank write about his father without bitterness? What part did Malachy play in creating the person that Frank eventually became?

5. Women – in particular mothers – play a significant role in ‘Angela’s Ashes’. Recall the scenes between Angela and her children; the MacNamara sisters (Delia and Philomena) and Malachy; Aunt Aggie and young Frank; Angela and her own mother. In what ways do these interactions reflect the roles of women within their families? Discuss the ways in which Angela struggles to keep her family together in the most desperate of circumstances.
6. McCourt titles his memoir Angela’s Ashes after his mother. What significance does the phrase “Angela’s Ashes” acquire by the end of the book?

7. Despite the McCourt’s horrid poverty, mind-numbing starvation, and devastating losses, ‘Angela’s Ashes’ is not a tragic memoir. In fact, it is uplifting, triumphant even. How does McCourt accomplish this?

8. Irish songs and lyrics are prominently featured in Angela’s Ashes. How do these lyrics contribute to the unique voice of the memoir? How does music affect Frank’s experiences? How do you think it contributes to influence his memories of his childhood?

9. Frank spent the first four years of his life in the United States. How do his experiences in America affect Frank’s years in Ireland?

10. On the first page of ‘Angela’s Ashes, McCourt says, “worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.” In what ways was his childhood miserable? How did being Irish and being Catholic contribute to his misery?

11. Discuss McCourt’s experiences in school. Are you surprised to learn he became a teacher? How do you think his experiences influenced him?

12. How would you describe McCourt’s father, Malachy? What are the different ways Frank McCourt views his father in the book?

13. How would you describe McCourt’s view of the Catholic Church?

14. Did ‘Angela’s Ashes’ teach you anything new about Ireland?
Plot

- Chapter handout: Visual plot summary

Your challenge...
You have been given one tile. You must visually illustrate the chapter of ‘Angela’s Ashes’ you have drawn out. You can use no more than 12 words on your tile. This must be visually appealing and also correctly tell your chapter of the story. When put all together, the tiles should create a visual plot summary of ”Angela’s Ashes”. Upon finishing your tile, write a paragraph to go with it that sums up what happens in the chapter (for those visually impaired!).

Chapter 1 = 1-43
Chapter 2 = 44-97 (2 people)
  Chapter 3 = 98-123
  Chapter 4 = 124-145
  Chapter 5 = 146-167
  Chapter 6 = 168-190
Chapter 7 = 191-245 (2 people)
  Chapter 8 = 246-268
  Chapter 9 = 269-290
  Chapter 10 = 291-310
  Chapter 11 = 311-330
  Chapter 12 = 331-345
  Chapter 13 = 346-360
  Chapter 14 = 361-381
  Chapter 15 = 382-396
  Chapter 16 = 397-415
  Chapter 17 = 416-425
  Chapter 18 = 426
Quiz

So you’ve read ‘Angela’s Ashes’…but how well? This quiz is multi-choice. Tick/highlight the correct answer for each question. Each question is worth 1 mark.

1. Where in New York do the McCourts live?
   - □ Hoboken
   - □ Brooklyn
   - □ Statan Island
   - □ Long Island

2. Where does Frank play?
   - □ Playground
   - □ Swimming pool
   - □ Street
   - □ Zoo

3. What is Frank’s brother’s name?
   - □ Malachy
   - □ Jack
   - □ Jude
   - □ Roger

4. What is Frank’s father’s name?
   - □ Malachy
   - □ Jack
   - □ Roger
   - □ Michael

5. Frank’s parents met in?
   - □ Ireland
   - □ Belfast
   - □ New York
   - □ Coney Island

6. Frank’s father grew up in?
   - □ The South of Ireland
   - □ New York
   - □ The Irish Republic
   - □ The North of Ireland

7. Name of the County Malachy comes from
   - □ Belfast
   - □ Limerick
   - □ Sligo
   - □ Antrim

8. Why does Angela marry Malachy?
   - □ He’s rich
   - □ She’s lonely
   - □ He’s handsome
   - □ She’s pregnant

9. What finally forces the McCourts to return to Ireland?
   - □ Margaret’s death
   - □ Angela’s death
   - □ Grandma’s death
   - □ Malachy’s death

10. Who sends the money for the McCourt’s fare?
    - □ Grandma
    - □ Aunt Aggie
    - □ Angela’s cousins
    - □ Pa Keating

11. Where do the McCourts go first upon returning to Ireland?
    - □ England
    - □ The North
    - □ Limerick
    - □ Dublin

12. What are the names of Angela’s cousins?
    - □ Roger and Jack
    - □ Aggie and Delia
    - □ Delia and Agnas
    - □ Philomena and Delia
13. Why do the McCourts go to Dublin?
   - They are going to live there
   - For Malachy to get a job in a pub
   - For Malachy to get a pension from the IRA
   - For Angela to get a job in a hotel

14. Where do the McCourts sleep while in Dublin?
   - At a hotel
   - At Grandma's house
   - In the jail
   - At Malachy's parent's house

15. Which city do the McCourts settle in?
   - Belfast
   - Limerick
   - Dublin
   - London

16. With what does Grandma greet them?
   - A brand new house
   - Scowls and anger
   - Flowers and candy
   - Hugs and kisses

17. What does the family find inside their mattress?
   - Feathers
   - Money
   - Straw
   - Fleas

18. What happens after one-year-old Oliver is taken to the hospital?
   - He stays 3 days and is released
   - He has his tonsils out
   - He wakes up
   - He dies

19. What is the name of Eugene's twin?
   - Malachy
   - Frank
   - Oliver
   - Pat

20. Where do the boys attend school?
   - Jesuits
   - Dublin's National School
   - Limerick Prep
   - Leamy's

21. What does Frank throw stones at in the cemetery?
   - Blue Jays
   - Jackdaws
   - Trees
   - Squirrels

22. What happens to Eugene?
   - He falls of a tree in the People's Park
   - He begins walking
   - He gets promoted at the Dockworks
   - He dies

23. The name of Frank's ultimate hero?
   - Sampson
   - Superman
   - Bat Man
   - Cuchulain

24. How do the children in school view the new boys?
   - As Yanks
   - Like themselves
   - As gifted
   - As troublemakers

25. Describe Frank's diet
   - High fat
   - Too many carbs
   - Low fat
   - Inadequate
Plot Summary

Plot summaries should record:

- All significant action
- Where and when the action occurs
- Why the action happened
- Thoughts and/or comments of characters that influence the action.

Student directed activities:

- Plot summary table – use this to record specific actions throughout the novel. E.g.
  - Angela and Malachy marry
  - Margaret dies
  - Arrive in Ireland
  - Death of Oliver and Eugene
  - Move to Roden Lane
  - Malachy loses job at cement factory
  - Frank’s First Confession and Communion
  - Franks learns Irish dancing
  - Frank joins Confraternity
  - Frank is rejected as and altar boy
  - Mr. O’Neill’s apple peel
  - Frank helps Pat sell the Limerick Leader
  - Frank reads to Mr. Timoney
  - Alphie is born – 5 pounds sent
  - Frank’s Confirmation
  - Frank has Typhoid Fever
  - Malachy left to work in England
  - Angela becomes ill with fever – Frank steals food and lemonade
  - Frank helps Mr. Hannon and feels like a man
  - Malachy returns from England with nothing, and goes again
  - St Vincent De Paul Christmas – sheep’s head
  - Evicted from Roden Lane, move in with Laman
  - Frank leaves Laman’s and goes to stay with Ab Sheehan
  - Frank starts work as a Telegram boy
  - Frank gets Carmody telegram
  - Frank writes letters for Brigid Finucane
  - Frank has his first pint and hits Angela
  - Frank saves for America
  - Frank travels to America
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Angela’s Ashes by Frank McCourt</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Where and when?</th>
<th>Why?</th>
<th>Character thoughts and/or comments</th>
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<td>Ch....pg....</td>
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- Decide on a certain number of important plot/story points then write them in a flow diagram.

- Find no more than 15 quotes from the text. Use these quotes to build a plot summary of text. Make sure you include important events. These quotes will build a quick condensed version of the text.

**Teacher directed activities/notes**

1. Chapter summary handout

2. Key Facts sheet (important plot details/summary of all elements of text)

3. Plot Overview
Angela’s Ashes: Key facts

**Full title:** ‘Angela’s Ashes: A Memoir’

**Author:** Frank McCourt

**Type of work:** Memoir; autobiography

**Genre:** Memoir – a type of autobiography in which the author writes a personal record of the events, people, and situations that have shaped his or her life. Memoirs can span an entire lifetime, but often focus on a specific period of the writer’s life.

**Language:** English, with use of Irish, English, and American dialects.

**Time and place written:** Early 1900s, New York

**Date of first publication:** September 2006

**Narrator:** Frank McCourt

**Point of view:** First person

**Tone:** Humorous, self-effacing, matter-of-fact. McCourt matches his tone to the age of the narrator, becoming more serious and worldly as the narrative progresses.

**Tense:** Present tense or immediate past; the author writes as though he is experiencing events for the first time as they unfold.
**Setting (time):** Late 1930s and 1940s

**Setting (place):** Brooklyn, New York (briefly); Limerick, Ireland

**Major conflict:** Frank faces hunger, neglect, his father’s alcoholism, oppressive weather, and illness in the face of the broader struggle that defines his memoir – getting out of Ireland and rising up from poverty. Along the way he faces opposition from schoolmasters, priests, family members, and people in all positions of authority who look down on him because of his lower-class status.

**Rising action:** Frank increasingly condemns his father’s irresponsibility but worries also about the morality of his own behaviour; he determines to make a success of himself in America.

**Climax:** Near the end, a priest absolves Frank of all his sins, allowing Frank to leave for America with a clear conscience and to reassert control over his future. At his point, Frank’s dream of escaping Ireland and overcoming poverty is possible.

**Themes:** The limitations imposed by class; hunger and food; prejudice; hope; overcoming obstacles; family; manhood; drinking in the Irish Culture; education.

**Motifs:** Guilt; anti-English sentiment; stories; songs; and folktales

**Symbols:** The River Shannon; eggs; ashes
The narrator, Frank McCourt, describes how his parents met in Brooklyn, New York. After his mother, Angela, became pregnant with Frank, she marries Malachy, the father of her child. Angela struggles to feed her growing family of sons, while Malachy spends his wages on alcohol. Frank’s much-loved baby sister, Margaret, dies and Angela falls into depression. The McCourts decide to return to Ireland. More troubles plague the McCourts in Ireland. Angela has a miscarriage, Frank’s two younger brothers die, and Malachy continues to drink away the family’s money.

Frank’s childhood is described as a time of great deprivation, but of good humour and adventure as well. When the first floor of the house floods during the winter, Angela and Malachy announce that the family will leave the cold damp of the first floor, which they call “Ireland”, and move to the warm, cosy second floor, which they call “Italy”. Although Malachy’s alcoholism uses up all of the money for food, he earns Frank’s love and affection by entertaining him with stories about Irish heroes and the people who live on their lane.

Over the course of a few years, Angela gives birth to two sons, Michael and Alphonsus (‘Alphie’ for short). As Frank grows older, the narration increasingly focuses on his exploits at school. When Frank turns ten, he is confirmed. Right after this, he falls ill with typhoid fever and must stay in the hospital for months. There, he gets his first introduction of Shakespeare. Frank finds comfort in stories of all kinds, from Shakespeare to movies to newspapers. By the time he returns to school, his gift for language is obvious. In particular, Frank’s flair for storytelling gets him noticed by his teacher.
With the onset of World War II, many fathers in Limerick go to England to find work and send money back to their families. Eventually, Malachy goes as well, but he fails to send money home. Frank begins to work for Mr. Hannon. This is the first in a series of jobs. Frank will go on to work for Mr. Timoney, Uncle Ab, the post office, Mrs. Finucane, and Mr. McCaffrey. Frank enjoys the feeling of responsibility he gets from working, and he dreams of saving enough to provide his family with food and clothes.

The McCourts get evicted from their lodgings and must move in with Angela’s cousin Laman. Angela begins sleeping with Laman, an arrangement that makes Frank increasingly uncomfortable and angry. He also begins to feel guilty about his own sexual feelings. The priests’ strict mandates against masturbation make Frank feel guilty when he masturbates.

While working as a messenger boy, Frank begins a sexual relationship with a customer, Theresa Carmody, who eventually dies of consumption, leaving Frank heartbroken. Frank saves enough money to get to New York. On his first night there, he attends a party and sleeps with an American woman. Though sad to leave behind Ireland and his family, Frank has great expectations for the future.
Key moments in the story

Using the text Angela’s Ashes, find short quotes about the following:
- Frank looking after the twins in Brooklyn (p25)
- The death of Margaret in Brooklyn (p31)
- Mum depressed and not looking after the twins so Frank has to (p31-32)
- An interview with St Vincent de Paul to get grocery docket (p67)
- Angela all depressed (p77-78)
- Malachy coming home boozed (p81)
- Burying Eugene (p96)
- Roden Lane (p98)
- Getting a docket for furniture (p98)
- Christmas dinner (p105)
- A new brother from the 7th step (p111)
- The St Vincent de Paul visit Roden Street (p113-114)
- Preparing for first communion (p134-135)
- Frank begins earning some money (p198-200)
- Frank gets typhoid (p215-218)
- Frank goes home (p229)
- Frank has conjunctivitis (p259)
- Hunger (p271)
- The warmth (and snobbery) of the Jesuit church (p281)
- Frank works with Mr Hannon shifting coal: mum cries at the effect on Frank’s eyes (p307)
- Malachy drinks the money again (p313)
- The rent man losing patience (p320)
- The upstairs room collapses, wood used for fire (p321)
- They go to live with Laman Griffin (p322-323)
- Frank finds ‘the excitement’ difficult; he doesn’t like what his mother is reduced to (p340)
- Laman won’t give Frank the use of the bike (p343)
- Stealing milk and bread (p349)
- Frank gets evicted from the library (p355)
- Caught in his Grandma’s dress while his clothes are drying (p356-358)
- Aunt Aggie buys Frank new clothes for his job (p363)
- Delivering telegrams (p382)
- Starts writing letters for Mrs Finucane (p387)
- Frank goes to confession and is reassured that Theresa’s death is not his fault (p402)
- Mrs Finucane is dead (p416)
- Frank throws away her ledger and pockets some money (p416)
Research

As part of a group you will research and present one of the topics listed below. You will be given TWO class periods to complete your research and prepare your presentation. It is important that each group member contributes equally to the task, including the presentation to the class. Some focus questions have been provided with each area of research.

Ireland

- Locate Ireland on a world map and then find a map of Ireland. You will need to draw/trace/make copy of this to show the class.
- Locate the following places on the map – Dublin, Limerick, Belfast, Galway, Shannon River, Toome.
- Why is Ireland divided into Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland?

Irish History

- What are the origins of the Irish?
- What was the social structure of Ireland?
- What has traditionally been the relationship between England and Ireland?
- Why is Ireland divided today?
- What is the I.R.A?

Irish Culture

- What are some myths/legends and heroes of Ireland?
- What are some festivals, traditions and customs of Ireland?
- What are some of the qualities/abilities that are associated with the Irish?
Catholicism

- What are the beliefs and practices of Catholicism?
- What role has/does religion play in Irish life?
- What is/was the link between the church and education in Ireland?

Irish Emigration

- Why have people traditionally left Ireland?
- What was the potato famine? (also look at cause and effect)
- What was the reason behind the wave of emigration in the 30’s?
- What were the destinations of the Irish emigrants?
- How were Irish immigrants received in America and how did they adapt to this new life?
- Who are some famous Americans of Irish Descent?

Frank McCourt

- What does the writer now do and where does he live?
- Why did he write his memoirs?
- What became of his family and his relationship with them?
Characters

- Frank McCourt
- Malachy (father)
- Angela (mother)
- Malachy
- Oliver
- Eugene
- Margaret
- Michael
- Alphie
- Grandma
- Aunt Aggie
- Pa Keating
- Ab Sheehan
- Laman Griffin
- The MacNamara sisters
- Mr Timoney
- Theresa Carmody
- The Hannons
- Patricia Madigan
- Seamus
- Mrs. Brigid Finucane
- Mr. McCaffrey
- The Molloys
- Billy Campbell
- Paddy Clohessy
- Mr. O’Halloran
- Peter Dooley
ADJECTIVES:

Sensitive  Storyteller
Enthusiastic  Outgoing
Determined  Caring
Humorous  Abrupt
Loving  Hostile
Alcoholic  Thoughtful
Attractive  Aggressive
Charming  Intimidating
Charming  Unfriendly
Rude  Unfriendly
Unpleasant  Argumentative
Aggressive  Injurious
Loyal  Intrusive
Warm  Intrusive
Confident  Meddlesome
‘Odd’  Obnoxious
Bossy  Depressed
Burly  Unsympathetic
Interfering  Argumentative
Eccentric  Concerned
Confidante  Compassionate
Supportive  Distant
Sympathetic  Cold
Adventurous  Nosy
Lively  Intrusive
Streetwise  Intrusive
Thoughtful  Meddlesome
Physically weak  Obnoxious
Emotional  Depressed
Survivor  Despondent
Intelligent  Unhappy
Survivor  Hopeful
Quick-thinking  Positive
Successful  Self-important
Emotional  Pompous
Survivor  Greedy
Survivor  Reckless
Intelligent  Negligent
Survivor  Beggar
Survivor  Violent
Father figure  Surly
Father figure  Hardened
Mature  Critical
Mature  Embittered
Optimistic  Optimistic
Optimistic  Pessimistic
Risk taker  Pessimistic
Proud  Pessimistic
Irresponsible  Pessimistic
Desperate  Pessimistic
Imaginative  Pessimistic
**Character adjectives**

For a character in Angela’s Ashes, compile a list of adjectives (see above). Then ask yourself **how did I know that?** This is a how question. How did you discover that the character was ‘proud’, or ‘greedy’ or ‘beautiful’, etc? You found out what the character thought and said and did; from what other characters though and said and did in relation to the character; and from what the author said about the character. For 3 of the adjectives, find a quote in the text.

**Key questions to ask about character**

- What is the character’s appearance?
- What strengths and weaknesses does the character have?
- What does the character think and/or say about themselves?
- How does the character act and react?
- Is the character associated with particular settings or personal possessions?
- What is the character’s background?
- What beliefs and values does the character have?
- How would you describe the character’s personality?
- What do other characters think and/or say about the character in question?

☐ Are his/her looks important to our understanding?
☐ What is he/she like?
☐ What ideas/attitudes do we notice?
☐ What sort of behaviour towards other characters do we see?
☐ How does he/she react to situations/problems?
☐ What strengths and/or weaknesses do we notice? You should find a quote to back up your answer to each of these questions.
**Character study**

In groups, on a large sheet of paper draw around a group member to create an outline of the character you have been allocated. Brainstorm and write down inside the body all the words you can think of to describe their character/personality. Inside and around the head area, brainstorm and write down all the words you can think of to describe their feelings. Outside the body, write down all the external influences on your character. Be prepared to explain your choices.

**Character cards**

Write a series of character cards describing aspects of a character’s personality. Swap them with someone else and practise identifying the character based on the description. Write a series of action cards describing things that characters did in the text. In pairs, swap cards. Call out an action to your partner, who will tell you why that action was important or significant.

**Character interview**

In pairs or groups, script and present an interview with a character, exploring their motivation.

**Character silhouette**

Silhouette = an outline filled with a solid colour, typically black on a white background, and most often for a portrait. Create a silhouette of one character. Treat this exercise like creating a static image. Once you have come up with an outline of your character, find a quote from the text that describes that
character. Also, think of FIVE adjectives to put inside the silhouette to really show who that character is.

**Character quotes**

Write down quotes on separate cards. Swap them with someone else and practise identifying the character who said it, what was happening at the time, and what happened before and after the words were uttered.

**Characters revealed**

Choose a crucial scene from *Angela’s Ashes*. Copy and complete the following table, describing significant information and saying what you found out about the character.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene:</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information quoted from text</strong></td>
<td><strong>Aspect of character revealed</strong></td>
</tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Character relationships**

Information about characters can be gained from looking at the way they interact with other characters. Consider factors such as:

- What relationships does the character have with others – intellectual/blood/romantic/business/accidental?
- How successful are these relationships?
- Describe any conflict.
Using an extract showing an interaction between characters in *Angela’s Ashes*, analyse the passage for the kind of relationship shown, how successful the relationship is likely to be, and obvious probably causes of conflict.

**Rounded and flat characters**

In studying characterisation, it can be useful to consider whether the characters can be described as rounded or flat.

- **Rounded character** – one who, in the course of the novel, changes and develops; is complex and detailed.
- **Flat character** – one who the writer has deliberately, consciously chosen to limit, often used as minor characters.

Using Angela’s Ashes, answer the following questions:

1. Which characters in your novel learn things about themselves/change their ideas and attitudes/develop aspects of their personality?
2. On the basis of your answer to the previous question, construct a chart for *Angela’s Ashes*, dividing the characters into flat or rounded.

**Becoming the character**

You have been allocated a role as one of the minor characters in Angela’s Ashes. Write a paragraph about how you met Frank and your view of him. Once you have done this you will read your paragraph out to the class so that others can identify your character.

As one of the text’s main characters, write and present a monologue in which you give your views on life, your views/emotions about things that happened to you and the people in your life, how you changed/did not change over the course of the novel.
Essay questions on character

□ Analyse how a text you have studied created a strong first impression of individual(s) AND why this first impression was important to the text as a whole.

□ Analyse how a text you have studied created a strong first impression of character(s) AND why this first impression was important to the text as a whole.

□ Show how the experiences and/or behaviour of a character or individual were important in a text you have studied.

□ Show how EITHER relationships OR conflicts were important in a text you have studied.

□ Show the way in which a text you have studied develops the challenges and/or conflicts faced by a character or characters.

□ Outline the importance of the actions or relationships of a character or characters in a text you have studied.

□ Show how your studied text caused you as the reader to adopt an opinion and/or develop a response to one of its main characters.

□ Show how a text you have studied dealt with the changes in the life and/or experience of an individual character.

□ Outline what a text you know well revealed to you about relationships between people.
“When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood”. p1 (setting the scene)

“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 years”. p1 (summing up ideas introduced in the text)

These passages introduce McCourt’s memoir. It is one of the only times in the narrative that we hear the adult McCourt expressing a strong, clear opinion. From this point on, the narration proceeds from a child’s point of view. While we are able to infer implied opinions, the narrator never again expresses his views overtly. Young Frank simply reports events objectively.

In this opening passage, the author’s wry humour contrasts with the bleakness of his subject matter: a child with an unhappy family life who encounters oppressive authoritarians at church and at school, and who is further demoralised by the historical injustices done to his country. Throughout the autobiography, the author reports on his trouble as he does here – with good-natured humour, and without self-pity.

“The master says it’s a glorious thing to die for the Faith and Dad says it’s a glorious thing to die for Ireland and I wonder if there’s anyone in the world who would like us to live. My brothers are dead and my sister is dead and I wonder if they died for Ireland or for the Faith. Dad says they were too young to die for anything. Mam says it was disease and starvation and him never having a job. Dad says, Och, Angela, puts on his cap and goes for a long walk”. p124

McCourt points out the danger of sentimentalising death. When adults tell children to look forward to death, children will lose motivation and abandon their ambitions. This quotation uses the rhythm and style of a real conversation, which reveals Frank’s awareness of his parents’ conflicting views. Angela is typically hard-nosed and feisty, blaming the death of her children on Malachy’s inability to hold a job and feed his family. Malachy’s behaviour is also typical, for he often says “och, aye” in response to difficult situations, and then goes out to escape conflict rather than confront or resolve it.

“I know when Dad does the bad thing. I know when he drinks the dole money and Mam is desperate and has to beg...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?” p237

Throughout the novel, Frank struggles to reconcile his love for Malachy with his anger at the way Malachy’s drinking nearly destroys the family. As this passage shows, Frank has an enormous amount of respect and love for his father, and he cherishes the time they spend together. At the same time, however, Frank realises that his respect for his father might offend his mother. When Malachy has been drinking, the rest of the children refuse to talk to their father. McCourt reveals here that Malachy’s drinking causes not only hunger and monetary ruin for the family, it forces the children to choose between their mother and father.

“Mam turns toward the dead ashes in the fire and sucks at the last bit of goodness in the Woodbine caught between the brown thumb and the burnt middle finger. Michael…wants to know if we’re having fish and chips tonight because he’s hungry. Mam says, next week, love, and he goes back out to play in the lane”. p255

Frank observes his mother’s growing despondency as another week passes without the arrival of a pay check from England. The ashes in the fire symbolise the crumbling of Angela’s hopes: her dreams have withered and collapsed, leaving her with only cigarettes for comfort. Frank considers himself mature in comparison to his naive younger brother. Frank knows that the promise of fish and chips is an empty one, because money will never arrive from their father. He knows that next week they’re likely to face the same hunger, and the same frustrations.

“Your lovely little sister is dead, Frankie. Dead… And where is your father? Drinking. That’s where he is”. p33 (when Margaret dies)

“Mam is slumped on the edge of the bed, making small crying sounds like a bird”. p77 (when Oliver dies)

“Where’s the money? The children are hungry. You mad oul’ bastard, did you drink all the money again?” p81 (Malachy’s alcoholism)

“There are seven masters in Leamy’s National School and they all have leather straps, canes, blackthorn sticks…If the master hits you there’s no use complaining to your father or mother. They always say, you deserve it. Don’t be a baby”. p84/86 (what the schoolmasters were like)

“Six months after Oliver went, we woke on a mean November morning and there was Eugene, cold in the bed beside us”. p87 (when Eugene dies)
“I’m ashamed of me like that the world should know we’re having pig’s head for Christmas. Boys from Leamy’s school see me and they point and laugh”. p106 (Christmas dinner)

“Mam says, I’m a martyr for the fags and so is your father. There may be a lack of tea or bread in the house but Mam and Dad always manage to get the fags, the Wild Woodbines”. p153 (cigarettes are a crutch/comfort)

“I sinned by taking my mother’s sixpence and lying and there’s a hot place in hell for the likes of me, say a decade of rosary and ask God’s forgiveness for you’re dancing at the gates of hell itself, child”. p161 (religion/confession)

“I’m seven, eight, nine going on ten and still Dad has no work...If he gets a job at the Limerick Cement Company or Rank’s Flour Mills he loses it in the third week. He loses it because he goes to the pubs on the third Friday of the hob, drinks all his wages and misses the half day of work on Saturday morning”. p161 (Malachy no work/alcoholism)

“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”. p167 (rejection/class distinction)

“Before the night is over all the money is gone and Dad comes home singing and getting us out of bed to line up and promise to die for Ireland when the call comes”. p191 (dying for Ireland/Malachy’s drunkenness)

“Outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation. Outside the Catholic Church there is nothing but doom”. p194 (Catholic religion)

“I want ye to stand in the middle of the pub and tell every man your father is drinking the money for the baby. Ye are to tell the world there isn’t a scrap of food in this house, not a lump of coal to start the fire, not a drop of milk for the baby’s bottle”. p207 (Malachy drinks the money order for Alphie)

“Mr O’Dea’s eyes roll in his head when he tells us that with Confirmation we will become part of Divinity. We will have the Gifts of the Holy Ghost: Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety, the Fear of the Lord. Priests and masters tell us Confirmation means you’re a true soldier of the Church and that entitles you to die and be a martyr in case we’re invaded by Protestants or Mohammedans or any other class of a heathen”. p211 (Catholic Church/Confirmation)

“I want to tell them that I won’t be able to die for the Faith because I’m already booked to die for Ireland”. p211
“Mam comes with Dr. Troy. He feels my forehead, rolls up my eyelids, turns me over to see my back, picks me up and runs to his motor car. Mam runs after him and he tells her I have typhoid fever. Mam cries”. p216 (Frank almost dies from Typhoid fever)

“Dad says, The good Catholic woman must perform her wifely duties and submit to her husband or face eternal damnation”. p246 (Catholic ‘rules’)

“I want the job. I want to bring home the shilling. I want to be a man”. p261 (Frank shows the sense of responsibility that he feels towards his family, and his desperation to become a man).

“Malachy and Michael look shocked over the way I got the bread and lemonade but then Malachy says it was only what Robin Hood would have done, rob the rich and give to the poor”. p271 (Hunger/stealing)

“You’re doomed. Your father and mother had the excitement and they weren’t married so you’re not in a state of grace.

  What am I going to do?
  Nothing. You’re doomed.” p294 (Frank finds out he is doomed)

“I take the newspaper from the floor. I lick the front page, which is all advertisements for films and dances in the city. I lick the headlines. I lick the great attacks of Patton and Montgomery in France and Germany. I lick the war in the Pacific...I suck the paper till there isn’t a smidgen of grease”. p345 (hunger/desperation)

“I’m crying for I don’t know what’s happening to me if I’m killing myself catching the consumption from her mouth I’m riding to heaven I’m falling off a cliff and if this is a sin I don’t give a fiddler’s fart”. p379 (Frank and Theresa have sex)
Themes

While plot is the record of what happens in the novel, theme refers to the significance of events. Theme refers to the central concept, idea or message which a novel contains.

Anonymous Letterbox

What do you think the themes are in Angela’s Ashes? (You may come up with quite a list!) Scribble your answers on a slip of paper and post in the box so we can discuss next lesson.

After discussing letterbox...

☐ List the two themes that interest you most and explain why.
☐ Find five supporting events and/or examples of character behaviour for each theme.
☐ Collect four quotations you could use in discussion of one of the themes you have chosen.

An approach to theme

☐ Class discussion to clarify just what is meant by ‘theme’. Encourage them to think outside the straightjacket of ‘the moral of the story’, and see themes as ideas, issues, concepts that are explored in literature. It is particularly true in this text; its themes are not ‘lessons’ but explorations of aspects of its characters.
☐ You will be divided into groups of four or five. Each group should reach consensus on the three most important ideas explored in the novel. As a
group, you will present a chart/poster with three columns, with details under the following headings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idea/theme</th>
<th>Incidents where it is an issue or is relevant; characters who illustrate it; quotations etc.</th>
<th>Significance (importance to the text as a whole)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Report back to the class.
  
  Several approaches:
  1. Each group presents its findings to the class orally. The poster/charts can be pinned up afterwards.
  2. Each group writes up their findings on the board. If the board is big enough, it can be divided into columns, with all groups writing up their findings at the same time.
  3. Each group contributes notes built up on the board by the teacher. This is the most efficient method and tends to avoid too much repetition.

- Class discussion and agreement on the most important of the ideas.

**Thinking about theme**

Imagine that you have the opportunity to interview the author or character from your novel. Prepare a list of questions you would like to ask that person, relating to themes and ideas, and either present these questions to others who have read the book or answer them yourself.
Just a minute

After studying Angela’s Ashes, attempt to speak impromptu for 1 minute without irrelevancies or repetition on a subject related to the text.

Subjects:

- Overcoming obstacles
- Robin Hood: stealing from the rich to give to the poor
- Alcoholism
- Poverty
- Ireland (Irish culture)
- Religion
- Family
- Prejudice and discrimination
- Hope
- Autobiography
- Hunger and food
- Lower-class status
- Growing up
- School/education
- America
- Frank McCourt
- Malachy McCourt (Snr)
- Angela McCourt
- The drinking culture
- Responsibility
- Survival

Collage

Design a poster/item/object to represent a main theme in ‘Angela’s Ashes’. You can use any materials you like…it can be 3D if you want it to be! Be imaginative and creative, and think of a unique idea and way of presenting it. You will have 2 class periods to complete (and homework time if you wish!). You must also include a quote from the text that reflects your idea, and a paragraph explaining how you have conveyed that idea using visual techniques (just like static image commentary…but shorter!)
Notes on themes

Angela’s Ashes depicts the survival of the McCourt family through the time of the Great Depression and World War II. Poverty is an inevitable theme arising from the times themselves and the incompetence of Frank McCourt’s parents in caring for their children. This failure of the family and McCourt’s continued belief in his responsibility to it forms a strong theme in the text. Prejudice in all its forms is always the handmaiden of poverty, but hope is also a strong theme of this text, as McCourt survived on his dream of returning to the USA.

Irish Nationalism

A major theme of the text is what it means to be Irish. The character of Malachy McCourt demonstrates Northern Irish nationalism at its extreme. Malachy had fought for Irish independence in the Easter Uprising of 1916, and even though he was rejected by the IRA on his return to Ireland, he sang the songs associated with the uprising – ‘Roddy McCorley’, ‘Kevin Barry’ and ‘The Boys of Wexford’. He taught McCourt the story of Cuchulain – a Northern Irish tale a great hero who fought for Ireland in much the same way as the heroes of the songs. All Malachy’s heroes died young, and he made his sons promise to die for Ireland. Nationalism in this context is fierce, unforgiving and uncompromising.

Poverty

From the time he was born until he obtained a steady job, Frank McCourt lived in appalling poverty, for which there were both national and personal causes. Angela’s Ashes is set during the Great Depression, when all countries were experiencing economic difficulties, so Ireland was very poor.

Malachy McCourt took his family back to an impoverished Ireland and chose to live in the South, where he was discriminated against because of his Northern name and accent. He was unable to find work for a long time, and when he was eventually employed it was too late. He had become an alcoholic, unable to control his drinking and conform to the demands of a job. This meant that his family was reduced to existence on the dole, around sixteen shillings a week of which nine or ten shillings was paid in rent. When Malachy drank the dole money, his family had to beg for charity from the Society of St Vincent de Paul, which also provided shoes for the children in winter.

As a good Catholic wife, Angela McCourt produced seven babies, making it impossible for her to work. Women were not eligible to receive dole payments at this time, so that when Malachy McCourt left her to work in England, Angela was destitute. She had to beg for food from the church and from St Vincent de Paul.
This was not sufficient to pay the rent so Angela was forced to live with her cousin, complying with any demands he made on her or the children. When Frank found a job as a post office telegram boy, the family lived on his wages, combined with Ab Sheehan paying the rent on Grandma's house.

The effects of this poverty were devastating to the family. Three children died of diseases caused by starvation and squalor, and Angela was hospitalised with pneumonia. McCourt nearly died of typhoid fever and later had such bad conjunctivitis that he was hospitalised and had problems with his vision after that.

Malachy McCourt simply ran away from his responsibilities. He was too proud to take money for writing letters or to take food for his family from farmers. He would not even pick up coal to keep his family warm, preferring that his small children did this for him. He was impervious to shame even when all his children shouted at him for drinking the rent, or Angela laughed at him for bringing home half a box of chocolates. Malachy was unable to hold on to money or make himself take his responsibilities seriously. This was a major factor that lead to the extreme poverty the family endured.

Frank McCourt was entirely different from his father. He reacted to poverty by becoming more resourceful, independent and miserly. As a child, Frank had no pride, preferring to pick up coal from the road than go cold and hungry. He learned at a very early age to steal food when there was no other way to obtain it, being careful as he grew older to take what he needed from the rich rather than the poor. The desire to rise above poverty made McCourt single-minded in his goal to reach the USA.

Prejudice

McCourt relates several areas of prejudice and discrimination in his text, all relating to religion and poverty.

Malachy McCourt

Malachy was initially unable to get a job in Limerick because of his northern Irish name and accent, even though he was a Catholic. As the economy improved, he managed to get jobs, but was readily sacked. Although he was popular around the pubs, he does not seem to have had any close friends. Frank McCourt was regularly abused by both his grandmother and Aunt Aggie because he looked like a Northerner. He was accused of having the ‘odd look’, which is defined by Aggie as the ‘sneaky air of a northern Protestant’. Grandma said that he had North of Ireland, stand-up Presbyterian hair. All this was in spite of the fact that whether or not Malachy was a Catholic he encouraged his sons to say their prayers and attend Mass. Malachy McCourt never retaliated against this
prejudice, but he did despise Limerick and lived for the day when he could leave the city.

**Institutionalised prejudice**

This kind of prejudice results from systems designed by governments to deal with groups of people in underprivileged situations. The men from the St Vincent de Paul Society such as Mr. Quinlivan, who interviewed the poor before giving them food vouchers or other forms of relief, were particularly insensitive and nasty. This was designed to discourage all but the truly destitute from asking for help, but also served to reduce the self-esteem of people who were already desperate. The men at the Dispensary, Mr Coffey and Mr Kane, were equally unpleasant, laughing at people who were required to outline their health problems in front of everyone in the queue.

The nurses at the hospitals also exercised power over people who had no way of fighting back. When McCourt was hospitalised with typhoid fever he was not allowed to even speak to the patient in the next room. When he communicated with Patricia, he was placed in an old fever ward by himself. When McCourt returned to the hospital for Christmas dinner he was required to eat alone in a ward and was dismissed by a servant, even though he had been invited back.

The teachers at Leamy’s School were more sympathetic about the problems caused by poverty, and taught the boys not to discriminate against one another.

**Hope**

McCourt was obsessed with the idea that he should return to USA, where he would be able to earn enough money to support his family. McCourt’s earliest memories centred around Brooklyn, the heart of New York, and he remembered the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island as the family left for Ireland. The symbols of liberty and economic opportunity formed by Liberty and Ellis Island formed an important image in McCourt’s mind. He firmly believed that the family should not have left the USA and that if he returned all would be well. He drove himself to attain the goal of returning to New York, rather than making good in Ireland itself. The close proximity of the USA to Ireland and the possibility of saving the fare enabled McCourt to maintain his dream in what we might consider impossible circumstances.

**Family**

The institution of the family is seen as a failure in Angela’s Ashes. Malachy and Angela McCourt were able to marry and reproduce, but they did not have the skills to create a family atmosphere. Not all their children survived, and those that did suffered appalling poverty and discrimination.
When Malachy McCourt returned to Ireland with his family, his parents could offer no shelter or hope of work in Northern Ireland. They were prepared to pay the family’s fare South in order to get rid of them. There is no indication that the family cared much for Malachy McCourt.

Grandma Sheehan helped the family to find a flat and paid the first week’s rent. Her house was supposedly too small to put everyone up, although they lived in it after she died. As time went by, Grandma Sheehan showed herself to be guided by intolerance rather than by family love. She despised Malachy Senior and Frank initially because of their appearance and later because Malachy could not even pay for the funerals of his own children.

Aggie Sheehan was no more tolerant than her mother, regularly abusing Frank McCourt for his appearance both as a Northerner and for his sore eyes. However, her pride forced her to buy clothes for Frank, which she could not afford, so that the family was not insulted when he started his first job. Her husband, Uncle Pa, was kinder and had more sense of family than any of the Sheehan’s.

Frank developed a sense of family responsibility which went beyond his own family’s actions and expectations. When he was a little boy, he promised to look after his mother and he tried to keep this promise all through his teens. When he earned his first money as a telegram boy he bought his brother Michael a meal and took him to the movies. Later, he supported his family as well as saving to go to the USA.

Even though McCourt’s family could be said to be entirely dysfunctional, he kept his belief in the institution of family and his responsibility to that institution. In later life, he married and had a child, showing that he never lost his belief in family. Angela’s Ashes is dedicated to Frank’s brothers, once again indicating an ongoing relationship that survived an alcoholic father, a depressed mother and an ineffectual extended family.

**Manhood**

It was extremely important to McCourt that he was considered a man when he earned his first week’s pay. He wanted to shout about his success in the street so that everyone could congratulate him. Fortunately, he refrained and bought his brother dinner and a ticket to the movies.

The ability to support his family dominated McCourt from the time he was a small child. He worked as soon as he was physically able, and took permanent
employment at the youngest possible age. Manhood meant handing his wages to his mother to feed the family, which he did willingly.

In Limerick, the transition to manhood was marked by a father taking his son for his first pint on the night before his sixteenth birthday. McCourt accompanied Mikey Molloy for his first pint, and was taken for his own by Uncle Pa. All the men in McCourt's life drank at the pub, some more than others, but were not joined by their womenfolk under any circumstances. Manhood was associated with alcohol, not earning money.

The Republic of Ireland, however, considered that the man of the family should be the one to receive unemployment and paid no money to women who were deserted. Women could not collect their husband’s dole payments to stop them drinking the whole payment, and were not supposed to wait for their men when they collected their wages either.

Malachy McCourt had firm ideas about the importance of manhood. He refused to stop and pick up coal, refused to accept money for writing letters or to ask farmers for food for his family. His mistaken pride resulted in great hardship for his children.

- Find two quotes from the text for each of these themes
Essay questions on theme

□ With reference to theme and content, explain why the text you have studied is of value to study at secondary school.

□ What central idea or theme in the novel you have studied most attracted your attention or interest? Why did it engage your interest? And how were you made aware of it?

□ Analyse how one moment or action in the text you studied had an impact on your opinions or ideas.

□ Analyse how the author communicated their thoughts in the text you studied through the dialogue or actions of the main character.

□ Analyse how the author’s main purpose in the text was developed through conflict – between characters, groups or ideas.

□ Describe a main conflict in a text you have studied and analyse how the conflict helped the author to present important ideas.

□ Outline an idea in your studied text and explain why the idea caused a strong reaction in you as a reader.

□ Show how a text you have studied has revealed aspects of human nature or human society.

□ Outline how any two aspects of a text you have studied developed the work’s theme or ideas. (You may have to refer to aspects such as character(s), events, structure, setting/atmosphere etc.)

Topics to think and write about:

□ What does McCourt have to say about love?

□ Why is Irish Nationalism so unimportant to McCourt?

□ Could the Roman Catholic Church be said to be a theme of the novel?

□ How does McCourt work freedom of speech into the text?

□ Is humour just a literary technique in this text or is it a theme?
Angela’s Ashes is primarily set in the Irish city of Limerick in the 1930s and 1940s. This was the time of the Great Depression when economies across the whole world failed to provide reasonable standards of living for the majority of the population. However, the situation in the lanes of Limerick was appalling, and this is demonstrated in a number of settings.

**Limerick**

Limerick is both a country and a city in Southern Ireland. The Limerick of the text is a wet, damp city abused for causing all kinds of chest illnesses including pneumonia and tuberculosis. The buildings in the lanes of Limerick were erected by Queen Victoria’s government and were called ‘artisans’ dwellings’. The buildings were so close together that a person standing in the middle of a lane could put their arms out and touch the buildings on either side at the same time. By the 1930s and 1940s they were unsanitary, overcrowded areas full of people too poor to buy nutritious food or to heat their homes properly. McCourt describes the furnished room his family first rented in Windmill Street as having one bed, which was flea-ridden, for the whole family. The next flat on Harstonge Street had two beds, but was little better. Finally, the house in Roden Lane was appalling. With two rooms upstairs and two rooms downstairs, it looked roomy until the lower rooms flooded every winter. It was also positioned next to the lavatory, which served all the families in the lane, and was never cleaned. To add to the unsanitary conditions, there was a stable next to the lavatory and this attracted rats. None of these residences had electricity, which was considered a luxury, and one house only in the lane received a radio from the government.

There were also rich areas of Limerick, which Frank describes in terms of the groceries delivered to their front doors and the coal stored in their yards. He had little interest in their interiors.

**Brooklyn**

Brooklyn is one of the five boroughs that make up New York City, and is situated on Long Island. The McCourts lived in a tenement area and had Jewish as well as Irish neighbours. Since McCourt is relating incidents from his very young childhood there is no description of what Brooklyn looked like. The children visited the park, and experienced kindly, helpful people, leaving McCourt with a lasting impression that the family should never have left America.
New York Harbour

When McCourt returned to the USA, his ship sailed past the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building and the Brooklyn Bridge.

To McCourt these landmarks symbolised the wealth and carefree lifestyle of rich America. They also have public meanings that McCourt assumes everyone recognises.

The Statue of Liberty welcomes immigrants to New York Harbour with a poem *The New Colossus*. This poem expressly invites the poor and downtrodden from the rest of the world to find security in America.

Ellis Island was the main reception centre for immigrants to the USA from 1892 until 1943. At the height of its operation one million immigrants per year were processed here.

The Empire State Building was the tallest building in the world from 1931 until 1970 with 102 floors, 1250 feet above street level. There is an observation deck on the eighty-sixth floor that has been visited by millions of tourists. This building has become a symbol of New York City itself.

The Chrysler building, seventy-seven stories high, was the second tallest building in the world when it was build in 1929.

The Brooklyn Bridge crosses the East River, joining Manhattan and Brooklyn. It was the first suspension bridge to use steel wire cables and when it was opened in 1883 was the longest bridge in the world. It was made a national historic landmark in 1964.

**Topics to think and write about:**

- How much do we learn about the physical setting of the Leamy School?
- What aspect of Limerick’s churches did Frank appreciate the most?
- What did Frank like and dislike about the physical settings of the Fever Hospital at the City Home?
- Why does McCourt tell us so little about the pubs of Limerick?
Description
(You should write about a paragraph for each of these questions)

1. Briefly describe the crowded multi-cultural tenement area where the family were in New York. Note the conditions (e.g. how the setting influenced events) that led to their return to Ireland. Refer to the good things that made McCourt decide to return as an adult.

2. Briefly describe the conditions in Northern Ireland where Grandpa McCourt lived. These conditions (setting) accounts for their shift south to Limerick.

Life in Limerick during the depression

Setting notes here should be quite detailed as the setting has a profound effect on the family. In each case give specific examples from the text. One line quotes would also be useful for the main bullet points. Write about a paragraph for each bullet point (using SEXY structure).

- Why is it so wet and why is this a problem?
- What sorts of jobs are there?
- What is the influence of unemployment?
- What about housing? Note the shifts the family did. Why? Describe ‘Italy’.
- How did the social environment influence life then? (e.g. institutionalised prejudice if you were poor)
- How much influence did the religious environment have on behaviour? The church itself?
- What do we find out about the physical setting of Leamy’s school? What does this tell us about Frank’s life?
Why do pubs and drink have such an impact on the family and McCourt’s life?

Find quotes, specific examples from the text, or write detailed comments to describe the following:

1. What were the employment opportunities, and what did the Irish have to do to earn money for their families?
2. Housing
   - What was the housing like for the unskilled?
   - Name the houses the McCourt’s shifted into.
   - Describe ‘Italy’ and the reaction of the St Vincent de Paul people when they visited.
3. The McCourt family’s state of health
   - When the family lived in Brooklyn, who died/survived?
   - What was the family’s health like in Ireland? Give specific examples of the problems.
4. Write a paragraph describing the prevalence of alcohol and attitudes to it in this book.
5. What was the attitude towards Northern Irish Catholics in Limerick during the 1930s and 1940s?
6. Give THREE specific examples of social attitudes towards the poor and destitute: what they had to do to get food, coal and housing when there were no wages coming in (e.g. Angela’s experience). How was it for the poor in relation to the Church?
7. What was the attitude towards women and how did they cope?

Setting – visual timeline
On an A3 piece of paper, visually show the different settings in Angela’s ‘Ashes’. Remember, setting refers to time (when), place (where) and society (who). Try and incorporate as many different settings as possible. The end result should be a timeline of Frank’s life during ‘Angela’s Ashes’, and the many different settings he encountered.

**Summary of setting in ‘Angela’s Ashes’**

Physical setting = chiefly set in Limerick, Ireland, in the 1930s and 1940s. The first and last chapter are set in or near New York.

Political setting = Ireland – the Southern part – was called the Irish Free State at that time. It had gained freedom from Britain only ten years before and was struggling economically.

Northern Ireland, as it still is today, was still British ruled and contained a mixed population of Protestants and Catholics. One of the most significant aspects of this political background, was the discrimination Malachy Senior suffered from because he was from the North. Even his son Frank was tarred with the same brush. To the more ignorant people of Limerick, and to employers, you were suspect if you came from the North. You might be a Protestant!

Social setting
- Poverty
- The Church
- Alcoholism
- Bigotry
- Women’s roles
- School
- The Irish National Character

Summary:
The setting is crucial to the book. McCourt’s stated aim was to create a record of “slum life at that time”. It is through the setting that you see McCourt’s themes and messages: poverty, survival etc. But it is the way in which McCourt depicts this setting that makes the book a success. Below are some of the methods used:

- Dialogue: the speech of the people
- The child’s eye view that creates such irony
- Characterisation
- Sensory detail (sights, sounds, colours, smells...)
An author’s style means the way in which vocabulary, symbolism and structure are used in the text. This relates to the purpose the author had when he/she decided to create the text, whether it was a novel, a biography or a work of non-fiction.

In writing his autobiography, Frank McCourt made conscious decisions about the subject material he would include in his text, the symbols he would incorporate and the structure of the text itself.

It is the style (how words are used) and the tone of this book that make it special. Reviews of the film of the book repeatedly claim that the film lacks the book’s magic because it lacks the book’s irony and humour.

The main features of the style are:

- The child’s eye point of view.
- The irony which arises from the young Frank’s innocence, he is often ignorant about what is going on but the meaning is clear to the adult reader.
- Caricaturing of minor characters to poke fun at the ‘Irishness’ of the community: their colourful speech and lack of logic.
- The use of present tense throughout most of the book.
- The lack of speech marks; the run-on sentences; the dearth of commas.
- The use of very lively direct speech, conveying in a simple fashion the Limerick dialect, the American accent and the language of Jews, Italians etc.
- The vivid use of language including sensory details, colours, imagery (similes and metaphors).
- The use of letters, sermons, an essay and teacher’s lessons to add colour. Most of these are probably only half remembered or completely made up but they are written the way Frank remembers them with an added humorous twist.
- The comic story-telling method, often building up to a punch line.
- The blending of humour and tragedy.
Autobiography

People write autobiographies for a number of different reasons:
- To record the lives of famous or influential people.
- To record the experience of one particular group of people.
- To record a particular time span such as a decade or half century.
- To record life in a particular location, for example, Frank McCourt’s ‘Angela’s Ashes’, which is set primarily in Ireland’s Limerick. Part of McCourt’s purpose in writing this text was to portray the life of the lower classes in Limerick.

Humour

McCourt’s humour has two main sources: childish innocence, including schoolboy humour, and the slapstick situations to which poverty can reduce people. These situations are used by McCourt to make satiric comments on the ignorance of the people he lived with and on the Catholic Church.

In the first few chapters of the text, there are moments of gentle humour and irony. For example, Frank’s full immersion baptism when his mother dropped him into the font seemed to be a Protestant symbol to the family.

Dad beating a mattress in the street in the middle of the night hoping the fleas would drop off and drown in the water Frank had to pour on them, then being advised by Uncle Pa to turn the mattress over to confuse the fleas, is stereotypical Irish humour.

There is schoolboy humour associated with First Confession and First Communion. The boys practice not sticking their tongues out too far to take the wafer, but the wafer itself often gets stuck and causes both Frank and Mikey Molloy grief.

However, Frank’s admission to the Priest when Grandma sent him back to Confession to find out if she had to use holy water to clean up his vomit, becomes a satirical comment on Grandma’s ignorance.