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The Memoirs of Frank McCourt: An Analysis

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I confirm that this thesis is my own work written using solely the sources and literature properly quoted and acknowledged as works cited.

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Abstract

After a brief introduction of the Irish American author Frank McCourt and his memoirs *Angela's Ashes* (1996), *'Tis* (1999), and *Teacher Man* (2005), this thesis presents the main issues with McCourt's memoirs and the opinions of the critics while also exploring the reason for its overwhelming success across the general public as well as the academic environment. The three memoirs are then briefly introduced, commented on and a detailed summary with quotes is provided for each of them. The thesis is concluded with a summary of discovered notions regarding the analyzed memoirs.

Key words

Frank McCourt; *Angela's Ashes*; *'Tis*; *Teacher Man*; Memoir; Irish American author; Summary

Anotace

Po stručném představení irsko-amerického spisovatele Franka McCourta a jeho memoárů *Angela's Ashes* (1996), *'Tis* (1999) a *Teacher Man* (2005) tato práce představuje hlavní problémy McCourtových memoárů a názory kritiků a zároveň zkoumá příčiny jejich ohromného úspěchu u široké veřejnosti i v akademickém prostředí. Tyto tři memoáry jsou následně stručně představeny, okomentovány, a každý z nich je detailně shrnut za doprovodu citací. Práce je uzavřena shrnutím objevů v kontextu analyzovaných memoárů.

Klíčová slova

Frank McCourt; *Andělin popel*; *Andělina země*; *Teacher Man*; memoár; irsko-americký autor; shrnutí

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1 Introduction

Frank McCourt (1930–2009) was a late-blooming author and a former high school English teacher known for the extraordinary impact of his memoirs. His memoirs are described as vivid, urgent, shocking, and thrilling, all while remaining a historical document of his life. His best-known memoir is *Angela's Ashes*, which, among other feats, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, remained *The New York Times* bestseller for 117 weeks, adapted for the screen by Hollywood, and has been translated into over thirty languages. *Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis* were translated into Czech by Josef Moník. While the Czech translation of *Angela's Ashes* (*Andělin popel*) sold well, the translation of *'Tis* (*Andělina země*) did not.

Despite its popularity among both casual readers and critics, many people raised questions about the memoirs' historical accuracy. In this thesis, I will summarize the events of the memoirs of Frank McCourt *Angela's Ashes* (1996), *'Tis* (1999), and *Teacher Man* (2005), explore the opinions regarding their validity and find new connections between the presented ideas and my own notions.

2 McCourt's Memoirs in Terms of Historical Legitimacy and their Legacy

In the essay "Popular Autobiography as Historiography: The Reality Effect of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*" by James B. Mitchell, Mitchell writes of the memoirs *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt and *Landscape for a Good Woman* by Carolyn Kay Steedman. *Landscape for a Good Woman* was published in 1986, ten years before McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. Steedman opted for a narrative style of a psychoanalytic case study; it "shows what went into its writing, shows the bits and pieces from which it is made up, in the way history refuses to do and that fiction can't"¹. However, out of these two, it was McCourt's first memoir which achieved terrific success, rather than Steedman's memoir.

Mitchell is looking for two answers in the essay: he is determining what made *Angela's Ashes* so popular and how McCourt managed to present the book as authentic historical material. Mitchell does so by comparing the two aforementioned memoirs.

Referring to Roland Barthes's notion of the "reality effect", Mitchell discusses the fact that including a vast number of details adds to believability of subjective memory recollections such as McCourt's memoirs. McCourt also presents the recollections with no interruptions or reconstructions, unlike Steedman, who showed some doubt and uncertainty while presenting her memories.

In contrast to Steedman, McCourt never explicitly questions his subjectivity. It could be speculated why he did not provide the insight into his young self's inner monologue, but perhaps the doubt about the accuracy of his recollection was in place. Mitchell also writes about McCourt's subjectivity as follows.

One of the conceits of *Angela's Ashes* is that the "I" seems to have been formed externally, as if McCourt's subjectivity developed only through his interacting with others, rather than in concert with introspective reflection.²

With that in mind, Mitchell concludes de-emphasizing himself helped McCourt to avoid having to involve the process of remembering. Fraudulence of one's documentation of one's past self is commented on by authors such as Roland Barthes or Gerald J. Kennedy. Kennedy writes that "no matter how 'sincere' writing seems to be, its professed innocence is a species of imposture"³. His ideas often stem from Barthes' notions regarding unreliability.

¹ Steadman, Caroline Kay. *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*. 1986. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997. p. 21

² Mitchell, James B. "Popular Autobiography as Historiography: The Reality Effect of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*." *Biography*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2003, p. 612

³ Kennedy, Gerald J. "Roland Barthes, Autobiography, and the End of Writing." *Georgia Review* 35.2 (Summer 1981): p. 383

Regarding the popularity of *Angela's Ashes*, Mitchell raises an important point—the very first paragraph of the memoir consists of McCourt ironically commenting on his parents' disastrous decision of moving back to Ireland. To the American readers—the majority of the memoir's readers—this return is shocking, as most cases of emigration they know concern moving to the United States, not the other way around. Accordingly, McCourt's praise of the US therefore wins them over emotionally from the very beginning.

Unlike Steedman, whose prose includes flashbacks, partial glimpses and generally the characterization of “memory as it is phenomenologically experienced”⁴, McCourt saves the process of reconstructing his own and his family's history for himself and only provides the reader with a chronological narrative that is pleasant to follow. When asked how he was able to clearly recall events from this long ago, he responded as follows:

In many ways I was guided by Gore Vidal, who said in his memoir, *Palimpsest*, that an autobiography is the attempt to recreate the facts of your life—your memoir is your impression of your life. The facts are there, but then what impression did they leave?⁵

Taking this into account, it could be considered certain McCourt not only took advantage of his factual experiences, but primarily the deep impression they left on him, merging them into what we know as *Angela's Ashes*. It is not surprising that while relying on impression, the realistic work was first identified as fiction alongside an autobiography before settling on the term “memoir”.⁶

Another assumption for the popularity of *Angela's Ashes* comes from poet and editor of the *Field Day Anthology* Seamus Deane, who attributes it to the general popularity of works emerging after the collapse of Ireland's religious and political authority as well as America's craving for stories about victims and their recovery.⁷

The tragedies and their perseverance in a person's memory is a topic supported by Susanna Egan's *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography*, where she notes that “memory of childhood recaptures a time of very keen, clear perception,” when “[e]motions are conveyed by precise particulars”⁸, which is apparent by the frequency of tragic topics appearing throughout McCourt's memoir. Even the very first mentioned memory consists of the three-year-old Frank, the age when both his and Steedman's memoirs began the recollection, and his younger brother

⁴ Mitchell, James B. “Popular Autobiography as Historiography: The Reality Effect of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*.” *Biography*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2003, p. 614

⁵ Mosle, Sara. “Talking to the Teacher.” *New York Times Magazine* 12 Sept. 1999: 57.

⁶ Foster, R. F. “Selling Irish Childhoods: Frank McCourt and Gerry Adams.” *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland*. London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2001. p. 166

⁷ Deane, Seamus. “Merciless Ireland: *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt.” *The Guardian* 18 Jan. 1997, p. T12

⁸ Egan, Susanna. *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984. pp. 74-75

Malachy on a seesaw, where Malachy gets injured and the sight of blood raises fear in young Frank. Suspecting Frank had done something to his brother, Angela angrily takes him home. On the way, they see the bloodied dog of MacAdorey's who was run over by a car a moment ago. The coincidence seems almost too convenient. The "convenient coincidence" is another pattern recurring throughout McCourt's memoirs.

Yet the maturity of McCourt by the time of writing (when he retired from teaching) was something that helped the memoir's success even in his own words. In his own opinions, if he were to have written the memoirs earlier, they would have been humorless. Frank's brother Malachy also stated his only problem with *Angela's Ashes* was "that he was too kind to people, many of whom were really shits"⁹.

Accompanied by wit and lucid presentation, Mitchell notes McCourt risked romanticizing his youth, especially due to the inclusion of stereotypical Irish imagery like wetness, stench, whiskey, and the church environment. However, McCourt's particular rendition prevented this from happening.

⁹ Hughes, Carolyn T. "Looking Forward to the Past: A Profile of Frank McCourt." *Poets & Writers* 27.5 (Sept/Oct 1999): pp. 27-29

3 The Analysis

3.1 Introduction

The main subjects of this thesis are the memoirs *Angela's Ashes* (1996), *'Tis* (1999), and *Teacher Man* (2005) by Frank McCourt. They are his most notable works which he wrote in retirement.

Despite not releasing any major works throughout his life, in the memoirs, Frank McCourt mentions instances which the reader can link with McCourt passively improving his storytelling skills and exploring his visual library—be it listening to the radio at Mrs. Purcell's, going to the movies, reading *Gulliver's Travels* to Mr. Timoney, or spending his time in the library as a means of escape during his coming of age. His passion for reading was also one of the main reasons he got accepted into New York University despite not having graduated with a secondary education diploma.

The popularity of his memoirs profits enormously from nostalgia as well as McCourt's writing style, which he discovered while watching his granddaughter Chiara's "no hindsight, no foresight" behavior¹⁰. Her intent on what she was doing provided McCourt with a resolute child-like voice.

As I will point out in the brief summary of *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt combined the voice of a child with adult's wit, giving out the fact of his young self's point of view to be somewhat enhanced.

The authenticity of the memoirs had been questioned by several people who knew the McCourt family personally. During a book signing in Limerick, one of McCourt's former classmates presented him with a photograph and asked McCourt to identify the people. After McCourt failed to do so, the man berated him for calling one of the people in the picture "Peeping Tom", after which he ripped his copy of *Angela's Ashes*.¹¹

Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, the author of the article *I Knew Angela*, questions the accuracy of McCourt's portrayal of his mother. McCourt's portrayal of Angela is rather passive and overly poetic while Steinfels viewed Angela as a lifesaver, who occasionally took care of her children and allowed her to take refuge and study in the library.

McCourt had experienced several negative encounters while appearing in public. Had it not been for his Irish charm, it is possible that his popularity would have experienced a significant downfall due to his adamant opponents.

¹⁰ Parker, Alan. *Production notes: Notes on the Making of the Film*. Online posting. Paramount and Polygram: 1999

¹¹ Hoge, Warren. "Limerick, Burned, Also Finds a Salve in 'Angela's Ashes.'" *New York Times* 31 Aug. 1997, late ed.: 1.

3.2 *Angela's Ashes*

3.2.1 *Angela's Ashes*: Introduction

Published in 1996, Frank McCourt's first autobiography *Angela's Ashes* received an overwhelming response. In *Teacher Man*, McCourt writes about the response as follows.

I hoped it might sell a few hundred copies and I might be invited to have discussions with book clubs. Instead it jumped onto the best-seller list and was translated into thirty languages and I was dazzled. The book was my second act. (*Teacher Man*, page 2)

In this statement, McCourt refutes F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous proverb that 'there are no second acts' [of life] in America. *Angela's Ashes* was made into a movie adaptation just three years later. One of the relevant points worth mentioning is that several of the locations had to be filmed in Dublin or elsewhere, not only because the buildings from the book had since been demolished or renovated beyond recognition, but also because the St. Joseph's and the Redemptorist churches in Limerick forbade any filming both in or around their buildings. The Franciscan Church on Henry Street, where Father Gregory heard Frank McCourt out, somewhat saving his faith in a desperate moment, first allowed filming but was later persuaded to withdraw permission by other churches.¹² This parallel further supports McCourt's critique of the church which is present throughout his memoirs, particularly in *Angela's Ashes*.

¹² Harrington, Susan Tetlow. "Angela's Ashes." *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2001, pp. 58–61. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43797018>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2023.

3.2.2 *Angela's Ashes*: Summary

After a warm dedication to Frank McCourt's brothers and acknowledgments of the women in McCourt's life the first chapter of *Angela's Ashes* opens. Frank McCourt does not wait to inform us that his parents' decision to move from New York back to Ireland was a bad one, as it resulted in a miserable childhood which he, looking back, considers unsurvivable.

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.

Above all — we were wet. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 11)

McCourt almost naturalistically describes constant illnesses, soggy clothes, and the ever-present stench. Limerick was apparently known as a very pious city, though McCourt claims this idea was affected by the church being the only dry incense-scented place.

McCourt briefly recounts the lives of his immediate family members. His father, Malachy McCourt, a problematic former member of the Irish Republican Army, had moved to New York as a fugitive. He spent most of his days drinking and ended up moving to Belfast in Northern Ireland in his declining years, where he remained until his death in 1985. His mother, born Angela Sheehan, made her way to America after failing to find a job in Limerick. McCourt does not hold back any details in describing the tragedies of their lives. His alcoholic father arrived in New York during Prohibition. His mother Angela never met her own father, as he had run off to Australia after dropping his then one-year-old son Patrick and falling out with his wife. Malachy and Angela met at a party shortly after Malachy was released from prison where he was staying due to a truck hijacking. Soon after, Angela became pregnant, so the couple got married.

Frank McCourt was their eldest child. Originally, the clerk entered the name "Male" on his birth certificate, as Malachy's Irish accent and drunk mumbling made it hard for the American clerk to understand the word "Malachy". Later that year he was baptized and named Francis after his grandfather. The name Malachy was then given to their second son. During that time, Angela was left by her family since she was seen as senseless for having more children with someone as "incapable" as Malachy. A pair of twin brothers born afterwards were named Oliver and Eugene.

The weekends after Malachy's paycheck arrived make for the first happy memories Frank McCourt shares. Their parents would wash them, tell stories, and laugh. Frank's mother Angela would meet with her friend Minnie MacAdorey at the playground and the mothers and children would tell stories and sing. Later in the month when resources would get scarce, Angela would get worried about whether Malachy brings or drinks away his paycheck. One time, she came to her husband's workplace and asked whether she could be given the paycheck as she did not want her husband to spend it in bars. She was denied since half of the wives would do so, and

consequently, Malachy was fired soon after.

The unhappy times are disrupted by the birth of the family's daughter Margaret. The father would sing and hold her all the time; everyone felt much more relaxed around her. Mrs. Leibowitz, another friend of Angela, said the world had never seen such happiness. Unfortunately, Margaret was sick and died just seven weeks after being born. Out of the siblings who died, Margaret's death was the most impactful one for the McCourt family.

Aside from the tragic turn of events, the vivid way Frank McCourt describes the scenes is astounding. The dialogues are spelled in the people's accents and what they are saying feels like a word-for-word recollection. It is worth mentioning Frank McCourt was around four years old around the described time, and he wrote these memoirs when he was in his sixties.

In the pram, Mrs. Leibowitz. Near my bed. I could have picked her up and she didn't have to die, did she? God doesn't want little babies. What is God going to do with little babies?

I don't know, missus. I don't know from God. Have soup. Good soup. Make you strong. You boys. Get bowls. I give you soup.

What's bowls, Mrs. Leibowitz?

Oh, Frankie. You don't know bowl? For the soup, darlink. You don' have a bowl?
(*Angela's Ashes*, page 38)

Frank McCourt adjusts the way of storytelling for his age from the given time. In his essay, Mitchell calls it "trauma alleviated through humor"¹³, which is a recurring sight throughout the memoir.

[My father] can't have Margaret anymore because she's like the dog in the street that was taken away. I don't know why she was taken away. My mother said she died in her pram and that must be like getting hit by a car because they take you away.

I wish little Margaret could be here for the soup. I could give it to her with a spoon the way Mrs. Leibowitz is giving it to my mother and she'd gurgle and laugh the way she did with Dad. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 38)

Angela especially took the death of her daughter badly. Mrs. Leibowitz and Minnie MacAdorey helped with the sons during that period. Eventually, Angela's cousins Philomena and Delia, who left Angela after her second baby was born, returned to her life, and asked their aunt Margaret to send the family money for ship tickets. In their opinion, returning to Ireland would do them good. Thus, the McCourt family returned to Belfast.

Suddenly, religion makes its first appearance in the memoir. A priest took the family by car for a bit, though he was shocked to hear the children did not know who a priest was or did. After arriving in Belfast and meeting with McCourt's grandparents and aunts, the family went to Dublin as Malachy Sr. hoped he could claim some money for joining the IRA and "doing his

¹³ Mitchell, James B. "Popular Autobiography as Historiography: The Reality Effect of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*." *Biography*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2003, p. 616

part” in the past conflict with the British, which turned out to be false. According to Mr. Heggarty of the IRA, there was no written record of Malachy’s military service. This greatly disappointed Malachy, as he raised his sons to love Ireland and would often wake them up at night to make them swear that they would die for Ireland.

A local sergeant offers to take the desperate family to the station where they can spend the night. Frank seems to vividly recall memories such as one of an imprisoned drunk women handing him butterscotch candy straight from her mouth. The guards are happy to hear little Frank knows the stories of Cuchulain.

Oftentimes, McCourt also recalls songs, be it his father singing about Kevin Barry and Roddy McCorley going to die or other people singing songs to pass their time.

Dad is shaking me. Up, Francis, up. It is noisy in the barracks. A boy mopping the floor is singling,
Anyone can see why I wanted your kiss,
It had to be and the reason is this,
Could it be true, someone like you
Could love me, love me?

I tell him that’s my mother’s song and he’s to stop singing it but he just puffs on his cigarette and walks away and I wonder why people have to sing other people’s songs. (*Angela’s Ashes*, page 54)

The sergeants generously paid for the family’s tickets to Limerick, where Angela successfully sought help at St. Vincent de Paul Society. She met with Nora Molloy who helped her show around and prevented her from getting scammed. Mrs. Molloy’s husband was allegedly a champion pint drinker. “We’re mothers before we’re women,” she told Angela McCourt after complaining about her marriage.

Frank McCourt describes vivid imagery even throughout his childhood memories. “The fire makes the room warm and with the flames dancing in the coal you can see faces and mountains and valleys and animals leaping” (*Angela’s Ashes*, page 70).

Little Oliver, one of the twin brothers, gets sick. As his parents take him to the hospital, the other three kids get to taste porridge for the first time at Aunt Aggie’s, where more melancholic topics are brought up. McCourt rarely acknowledges them as tragic—he simply states them as facts. Aunt Aggie is not happy to host the children, as she blames Angela for her sad financial situation. Aggie’s husband, Pa Keating, makes her cry after snuggling with little Eugene, Oliver’s twin brother, as she cannot have children of her own.

Oliver eventually died. Their father Malachy took the opportunity to take little Frank into stores begging for food for his remaining children. Some people were generous, while others sent them to St. Vincent de Paul Society. Malachy and Frank ended up going to a pub with Uncle Pa, where Malachy was given free pints and condolences. He cried over the beer—a rare sight for little Frank. Later, during Oliver’s funeral, none of the men cried, making Frank believe that

grown men can only cry over a pint. Frank shows his childish straightforwardness even while dealing with loss.

Dad said I shouldn't throw rocks at jackdaws, they might be somebody's soul. I didn't know what a soul was but I didn't ask him because I didn't care. Oliver was dead and I hated jackdaws. I'd be a man someday and I'd come back with a bag of rocks and I'd leave the graveyard littered with dead jackdaws. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 76)

One time, Malachy drank the dote money, so the next week, Angela was at the Labour Exchange with him, ridiculing him in front of his coworkers by taking the money straight from him. Angela could not stand being in the same room where Oliver lived, so the family moved.

Their new room was close to school and allowed the boys to go there. The place was a site of constant abuse of all sorts. The boys had to remember the opinions of all the teachers, otherwise, they would be physically punished. For instance, one teacher would say Eamon De Valera was the greatest man that ever lived. The other one would claim the greatest man that ever lived was Michael Collins. If the boys confused the two, the teacher would hit them. "If you ever say anything good about Oliver Cromwell they'll all hit you" (*Angela's Ashes*, page 80).

Soon after Oliver, his twin brother Eugene died of pneumonia. On the day of his funeral, Frank is sent with his father for dole money so that he would not spend it in pubs. At the Labour Exchange, the father and son get condolences from men touching their caps and saying: "Sorry for your troubles." Frank is given twenty-four pennies and two shillings from the men in the queue, which he decides to spend on toffee. His father, in the meantime, goes into a pub. Aunt Aggie finds Frank in the store and scolds him for being the same as his father, indulging himself on the day of his brother's funeral, which makes Frank feel regretful.

Frank is sent into the pub to pick up his father. He finds him and another man sitting at the table with pints on the white coffin, which angers him. Goodbyes are said as Uncle Pat lays Eugene in his coffin. The funeral takes place during the night, with the white coffin being described very vividly.

Upon returning home, there was a hole in the pillow shaped after Eugene's head. Everyone still expected him to crawl around looking for his brother "Ollie". Angela pleads to God to let her keep her remaining children. The family finds comfort in knowing the twin brothers are with their little sister Margaret in heaven.

I hope he's not cold in that white coffin in the graveyard though I know he's not there anymore because angels come to the graveyard and open the coffin and he's far from the Shannon dampness that kills, up in the sky in heaven with Oliver and Margaret where they have plenty of fish and chips and toffee and no aunts to bother you, where all the fathers bring home the money from the Labour Exchange and you don't have to be running around to pubs to find them. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 90)

The family moves from Hartstonge Street to Roden Lane, despite it being further from Leamy's National School, because Angela is reminded of the twins all the time. St. Vincent de Paul Society provides the family with second-hand furniture. Angela is forced to visit it quite often.

Their house is the last in their lane and there is a single lavatory for the entirety of it right next to their house. The stench makes the family worried about the illnesses they could possibly catch. Their father has brought a picture of the Pope with him all the way from America, earning criticism from Angela, and while attempting to nail it to the wall, for which he used a jam jar, he cuts his hand and smears blood all over the picture, which everyone disregards.

The father works at farms but brings no money home due to spending it on alcohol. He refuses to steal and beg for money as he claims he would lose his dignity. Their house gets very cold as they have very little coal. The upstairs gets the name "Italy" because it is warmer there.

Dad makes us say grace before meals and grace after meals and he tells us to be good boys at school because God is watching every move and the slightest disobedience will send us straight to hell where we'll never have to worry about the cold again.

And he smiles. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 96)

The family eats a pig's head for Christmas since they cannot afford any other type of meat. People in the streets laugh at them as they carry it, making Frank feel sorry for the pig.

Around that time, Frank's next sibling is born and called Michael. He catches the cold and Frank describes how his dad sucks his snot and spits it in the fire because they cannot afford a doctor. His childish naivete is often mixed with a reminiscing adult's sarcasm.

Dad says I'll understand when I grow up. He tells me that all the time now and I want to be big like him so that I can understand everything. It must be lovely to wake up in the morning and understand everything. I wish I could be like all the big people in the church, standing and kneeling and praying and understanding everything. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 108)

Another job of their dad is at a cemetery, although on payday he goes to a pub, his crying wife sends him to sleep downstairs and he misses work the next day, losing the job and forcing the family to live off of the dole money again. Out of disappointment, even his sons refuse his "Friday penny", which children get from their fathers to buy sweets.

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 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. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 113)

Nora Molloy's son, Mikey Molloy, is a cross-eyed boy, who is "the expert in the lane on Girls' Bodies and Dirty Things in General" (*Angela's Ashes*, page 114) and promises Frank to

explain all the adult secrets to him when he is 11. Mikey is apparently Protestant, meaning “he is eternally doomed anyway” and does not have to get married, instead, he can “go to the cinema to do the dirty things with the girls who do not care because they already did it with their brothers” (*Angela’s Ashes*, page 115), drink pints like his father, and win bets.

The nasty reality of daily life is often described very naturalistically, yet casually as would an innocent child. Frank talks about his classmates; Paddy Clohessy with no shoes, bald head, and the scabs he picks at and eats; or Brendan Quigley, who likes to ask questions and is often flogged for them.

Mikey Molloy read a story about Cuchulain’s wife Emer, whom he earned after she won a “pissing contest”. Due to the word “piss” being a swear word, Frank is terrified of confessing to knowing it during his first confession. He asks for help from the “Angel of the Seventh Step”, who apparently resides on their staircase, according to Frank’s father. Frank sits on the seventh step, senses a light in his head, and hears a backward-speaking voice telling him to confess, so he does. The priest choked during Frank’s first confession and assured him he was not the worst of the boys. McCourt’s dialogues reflect more of the people’s accents, as shown by his grandmother after Frank threw up after his first Communion breakfast.

Look what he did. Thrun up his First Communion breakfast. Thrun up the body and blood of Jesus. I have God in me backyard. What am I goin’ to do? I’ll take him to the Jesuits for they know the sins of the Pope himself. (*Angela’s Ashes*, page 129)

Adults around Frank usually smoke. They later need all their teeth pulled out, but the fake teeth hurt their gums and smoking eases them, so they never give it up—yet another instance of the perpetual suffering of the people around Frank.

Frank is sent to Irish dancing classes, where the sixpence is put into a cash box in the shape of a “black boy with kinky hair, big eyes, huge red lips, and an open mouth”. Frank eventually refuses to go to the classes since other boys at school laugh at him and he instead goes to the cinema. When his parents find out after several of Frank’s made-up dance demonstrations, he is sent to confession. The priest says he is dancing at the gates of hell, as he is fond of neither cinema nor dancing.

Time skips sometimes occur in the memoir. “I’m seven, eight, nine going on ten and still Dad has no work” (*Angela’s Ashes*, page 145). As always, the family has barely enough money to get by. Angela is often visited by her neighbor Bridey Hannon.

Bridey drags on her Woodbine, drinks her tea and declares that God is good. Mam says she’s sure God is good for someone somewhere but He hasn’t been seen lately in the lanes of Limerick.

Bridey laughs. Oh, Angela, you could go to hell for that, and Mam says, Aren’t I there already, Bridey?

And they laugh and drink their tea and smoke their Woodbines and tell one another the fag is the only comfort they have.

'Tis. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 145)

Frank shares several stories from his time at church. Whenever someone is missing, people say he has "taken the soup", meaning he has accepted the soup of Protestants and is no longer Catholic. Frank tries to become an altar boy and learns a lot of Latin with his father but is eventually turned down as "there is no place for him". According to his father, it is because they are "the poor from the lanes and it's hard to keep the Faith when people are snobby".

A new teacher appears in Frank's class. Mr. O'Neill, nicknamed "Dotty", praises Brandan "Question" Quigley for his curiosity. It is an unusual stance for a teacher in their school. Frank also remembers his classmate Fintan Slattery, who stood out by curling his hair, calling masses "gorgeous" and allegedly wearing dresses after his sister. "Dotty" often peeled his apple in class and gave the peel to well-behaving boys. When Fintan got it, he shared it with Frank and Patrick Clohessy and invited them to his house, where he watched both boys while they went to the lavatory and admitted he liked to look at Frank, making both boys uncomfortable.

Another time, he invites the two for lunch but offers them nothing. The hungry boys go steal apples and milk and hide at Clohessy's home for the night. The next morning, Angela finds Frank. She remembers Dennis Clohessy, Patrick's father, from her youth and reminisces about the times they used to dance together. Angela makes Dennis cry after singing a song she sang the day before she went to America. On Angela and Frank's way to school, the mother cries about Dennis Clohessy and the dancing nights at Wembley Hall and the fish and chips they ate after, showing rare signs of nostalgia and regret.

The memoir often depicts children's lack of concern for life. Mickey Spellacy's family is slowly dying from tuberculosis and whenever some of them die, Mickey gets excused from school for a week. His sister Brenda is sick, and Mickey asks the boys to pray for her to last until autumn so that he would get the week off. In return, Mickey said he will invite the boys to her wake for food. Brenda dies in September, but Mickey denies the fact he offered the invitation to the boys, making the boys wish death on him. Mickey also dies from tuberculosis, which "will teach him a lesson", according to Frank.

Frank's first experience with money-making is helping out Uncle Pat with selling newspapers. One of the elderly men, Mr. Timoney, asks him to read to him for a sixpence every week. During this time, Frank gets familiar with *Gulliver's Travels* and other stories. "Mr. Timoney is an old man but he talks like a friend and I can say what I feel. Dad would never talk to me like Mr. Timoney. He'd say, Och, aye, and go for a long walk" (*Angela's Ashes*, page 178).

Frank's last brother, Alphonsus Joseph is born. Their "Grandpa in the North" sends a telegram with five pounds, which the family's father spends in the pubs.

I know that I don't have to tell Mam anything, that soon when the pubs close he'll be home singing and offering us a penny to die for Ireland and it will be different now

because it's bad enough to drink the dole or the wages but a man that drinks the money for a new baby is gone beyond the beyonds as my mother would say. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 186)

When Frank is ten and is ready for his confirmation, he gets sick with typhoid fever. He is treated in the Fever Hospital in the City Home.

I drift off again and now they're waking me and pulling down the bedclothes. Father Gorey is touching me with oil and praying in Latin. I know it's Extreme Unction and that means I'm going to die and I don't care. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 192)

Miraculously, Frank starts getting better. His father looks sad when he visits Frank, who does not want him to go. In this moment, Frank's father does perhaps the only compassionate act that McCourt's memoirs mention.

And your father will be back in a day or two, won't you, Mr. McCourt?
Dad nods and puts his hand on mine again. He looks at me, steps away, stops, comes back, kisses me on the forehead for the first time in my life and I'm so happy I feel like floating out of the bed. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 193)

Frank talks a lot to his neighbor Patricia Madigan, a 14-year-old reader of poetry, who treats him as her equal. When the nurses find out they talk through the wall separating them, they transfer Frank upstairs. A few days later, Patricia dies without ever meeting with Frank in person.

It takes months for Frank to fully recover from typhoid fever. In school, he is sent to the fifth class instead of the sixth. He does not want to go to class with his younger brother Malachy and proves he is caught up enough to be transferred back to the sixth grade he was supposed to go to had he not missed school for several months.

Frank compares his father to the Holy Trinity, saying his personas during the day largely vary. There is the morning father reading newspaper, the evening one telling stories, and the bad one who comes home smelling of whisky and telling his kids to die for Ireland. Despite feeling sad about the bad persona, he still values the "morning dad" he would like to say "I love you" to, same as in the American movies, but in Ireland it would be seen as weak.

Despite their situation, the family takes care of a dog they named Lucky. Michael was especially fond of animals. There was a stable next to their house so apart from the lavatory smell, there was now the horse stable smell with an addition of rats and flies. The horse who stayed there, Finn, got sick. People in suits came in a car, making it the first car to show up in their lane, shot the horse, and then carried it away.

During the Second World War, people would often cheer for Hitler, as many people found work in Britain and could now afford electricity. Their father eventually decides to go to Britain for work as well and plans on sending his family some of his money.

If there's a chill in the air they'll turn on the electric fire for the comfort that's in it and sit in their kitchens listening to the news declaring how sorry they are for the English women and children dying under the German bombs but look what England did to us for eight hundred years. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 217)

We sit around the fire and drink our tea and cry because we have no father, till Mam says, Don't cry, don't cry. Now that your father is gone to England surely our troubles will be over.

Surely. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 221)

According to the people who met their father in Britain, he had gone mad with the drinks so much he might be sent back. Angela gets pneumonia and the 11-year-old Frank has to steal lemons for lemonade and other food to feed his mother and brothers. Their mother is sent to the hospital and the boys are put into Aunt Aggie's care. The boys' and Aunt Aggie's hate is mutual. She hits them and forces them outside in February, so the boys go to their own house, light up the fireplace and make some food. Frank claims he could already take care of his family.

Their father visits them around this time. The moments they spend together are pleasant and the future looks promising. However, he only sends the family money once and never again. When Angela is finally released from the hospital, Frank coincidentally spots her begging, which is the lowest of the low in his mindset and makes him feel ashamed.

Angela keeps a suitcase with important documents and a red dress from her dancing years, telling the kids to stay away from it. Frank starts a football club with Malachy and Billy Campbell named The Red Hearts of Limerick. Since they cannot afford team dresses, he decides to take his mother's dress and cut hearts from it, pinning them on their t-shirts. His books never mention his mother finding out.

Frank also finds out he was born just a few months after their parents' wedding and considers himself a miracle child, since as far as he knows, mothers get pregnant after their wedding. He decides to question Mikey Molloy, the expert on "Girls' Bodies and Dirty Things in General", who just reached 16 years of age and his father was taking him for his first pint. Mikey reveals that Frank is a "bastard" and a "doomed child" and lends him a penny to light a candle in the church and pray to Virgin Mary. Frank buys two pieces of toffee instead.

A penn'orth of Cleeves' toffee doesn't last forever and when it's gone I have to think of going home to a mother who let my father push his excitement into her so that I could be born in half the time and grow up to be a bastard. If she ever says a word about the red dress or anything I'll tell her I know all about the excitement and she'll be shocked. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 256)

Frank gets another job by assisting Mr. Hannon whose legs are all sore from carrying coal bags. The 11-year-old feels like a true man. He plans on being "black"—dirty from the coal—all year long, even on Christmas, since one of the Three Wise Men was black, which in his logic means "everywhere you go in the world someone is delivering coal" (*Angela's Ashes*, page 260).

One time, Mr. Hannon picked Frank in front of the school and Frank makes sure to put on a show for his classmates, imitating Mr. Hannon the best he can. Since then, he has gained his classmates' respect and they no longer call him names. However, Mr. Hannon catches gangrene and has to stop working, so Frank loses his job with him.

The dust from the coal caused his eyes to be all swollen and red, not allowing him to see a movie screen because of how much his eyes were watering. His mother cries at the sight of the money Frank makes. Mrs. Hannon says Mr. Hannon felt like he was with his son, making Frank cry even though he does not understand why he has been crying so often lately.

Their father is supposed to visit during Christmas time. They wait for him at the train station, but he never shows up. One of the train station workers offers the family to wait in his office and gives them cocoa and sandwiches.

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.

I say no more to her. I don't tell her I wish I had a father like the man in the signal tower who gives you sandwiches and hot cocoa. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 269)

Their father arrives the next day with half a chocolate box as a gift. Frank gets the chocolate with a nut and his brothers are jealous, until his mom says it is good for his eyes and Malachy eventually claims if he got a nut he would give it to "Frankie". Their father soon leaves again with empty pockets. Frank does not mention seeing him ever again in this memoir, which concerns his life until he reaches adulthood.

Frank talks about their clothes and how he has one pair of stockings they continuously repair, how he paints his skin in the places where the stockings are torn, how he has only one shirt that gets replaced only when Angela gets a docket for a new one at St. Vincent de Paul. The poor boys are taught to not pick fights with the rich ones who make fun of them since the rich ones will apparently run the country and the poor will deliver their groceries and scrub their floors.

Around this time Frank often finds his mother talking with strangers in their house. They are mostly mothers with children whom Angela cannot turn down when they ask for a few pennies. Sometimes she lets them sleep on the floor in front of the fireplace. Michael is like Angela but instead brings stray dogs and old men. Even at six years old, the boy keeps the fire running for the old men and offers them bread. If there is no bread, he begs for it at their neighbors'. This part of the book shows the contrast between the nasty side of their poor life and their, especially Angela's and Michael's, prevailing good-heartedness. However, one of the men brings lice to their house.

The lice are disgusting, worse than rats. They're in our heads and ears and they sit in the hollows of our collarbones. They dig into our skin. They get into the seams of our clothes and they're everywhere in the coats we use as blankets. We have to search

every inch of Alphie's body because he's a baby and helpless.

The lice are worse than the fleas. Lice squat and suck and we can see our blood through their skins. Fleas jump and bite and they're clean and we prefer them. Things that jump are cleaner than things that squat.

We all agree there will be no more stray women and children, dogs and old men. We don't want any more diseases and infections.

Michael cries. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 274)

Frank's grandmother's neighbor Mrs. Purcell has a radio and Frank often sits under her window and listens to music, Shakespeare, stories about the Greeks, and other topics. Mrs. Purcell lets him in so that he could hear it better.

When the play finishes she lets me fiddle with the knob on the radio and I roam the dial for distant sounds . . . Morse Code dit dit dit dot. I hear mandolins, guitars . . . I see sailors sipping mugs of hot cocoa. I see cathedrals, skyscrapers . . . cowboys on the American prairie. I see goats skipping along the rocky coast of Greece where the shepherds are blind because they married their mothers by mistake. . . .

This is BBC Overseas Service and here is the news . . . it's lovely to hear the American voices . . . and music of Duke Ellington himself telling me to take A train to where Billie Holiday sings only to me . . . Oh, Billie, I want to be in America with you and all that music, where no one has bad teeth, people leave food on the plates, every family has a lavatory, and everyone lives happily ever after. (*Angela's Ashes*, pages 274-275)

Chapter 12 ends with a time skip. In order to make a fire, the family eventually burned down a wall separating their two upstairs rooms and the house started falling apart. They were evicted and moved in with Gerard Griffin, Angela's cousin. They have their own lavatory and Frank borrows books for Angela and Griffin, who is called Laman by everyone. In the span of a few sentences, Frank announces the death of his grandmother, her son, Uncle Tom, and his wife. Their six children were put into orphanages, ran away, or lived in misery. Frank's brother Malachy joined the Irish army and Angela says her family is disappearing before her very eyes.

The library becomes a means of escape for Frank. One time, Frank waits in the library for the rain to stop and reads Butler's *Lives of the Saints*. He describes the brutal nature of these stories and his avid dictionary searches.

Frank shows respect towards his schoolmasters. Mr. Hoppy O'Halloran made the pupils learn *The Deserted Village* poem by Oliver Goldsmith by heart. McCourt includes various poem and song excerpts throughout the memoir, including this one.

And they still gazed, and still the wonder grew,
That one small head could carry all he knew.

We know he loves these lines because they're about a schoolmaster, about him, and he's right because we wonder how one small head could carry all he knows and we will remember him in these lines. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 288)

The teacher also praises McCourt and requests to see his mother. Despite Frank's unwillingness, he is recommended to the Christian Brothers. The teacher says he should have an education, not become just a messenger boy. However, Brother Murray at the Christian Brothers slam the door in their faces. Angela points out to Frank that this was the second time a door was slammed in their face by the Church, the first time being when Frank was not allowed to become an altar boy.

Frank is almost 14 and school is coming to an end. Their teacher urges them to go to America. Priests come to the school to recruit the boys. Frank wants to join the White Fathers, missionaries to the nomadic Bedouin. His doctor opposes the idea, saying his eyes are bad enough for Limerick, let alone the Sahara Desert. Laman's house does not feel like home. They have to be quiet, and their mother often sleeps upstairs with Laman.

Malachy says she stays up there because it's too hard for her to climb down in the dark. He's only twelve and he doesn't understand. I'm thirteen and I think they're at the excitement up there. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 291)

Frank then talks about the "Dirty Things in General" he has been doing and thinking about and a priest's speech on how the boys should not break the Sixth Commandment, "Thou Shall Not Commit Adultery", to which Frank has to confess.

Frank has been wanting to borrow Laman's bicycle for a school trip. Laman agreed in return for Frank taking out his chamber pot. The day before the trip, Frank did not have the time to take it out and the drunk Laman beat him up. Angela tried to calm the situation down by sleeping with Laman again. Frank ended up running away, imagining him burying Laman alive. He goes to his grandma's house to find Uncle Pat, whom he now calls Ab or The Abbot just like the other adults. There is no food left in the house, so Frank licks and sucks the newspaper Ab used as a napkin after eating his fish and chips.

Michael visits Frank and begs him to return since their brother Malachy joined the army and he misses his big brother. Frank refuses to see Laman or his mother, so he stays and enjoys the summer with no school in sight, only mail delivery. He dreams of buying his whole family clothes, food, and a house. He travels like his father used to. At the Norman castle at Carrigogunnell, he climbs onto the highest spot and imagines the Norman girls singing in French.

I interfere with myself and spurt all over Carrigogunnell and fields beyond.

That's a sin I could never tell a priest. Climbing to great heights and going at yourself before all of Ireland is surely worse than doing it in a private place with yourself or with another or with some class of a beast. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 299)

On his way back, he steals a loaf of bread and some milk, since the number of sins does not "alter the time spent in hell for eternity". Despite residing at The Abbot's, he still has Laman's library card, so he keeps visiting it and reading books. He reads about the Saints and is strongly

influenced by a book by Lin Yütang. He searches up the word “turgid” which gets him thrown out of the library.

He is supposed to start work the next day, so he washed all his ragged clothes and slept in his late grandma's dress. Aunt Aggie finds him and buys him new clothes, allowing Frank to start his job as a delivery boy with respect. Michael comes to visit him almost every day at The Abbot's, sometimes he even stays overnight. Angela sometimes visits him as well. Eventually, the whole family moves to The Abbot's.

One day, Frank gets a telegram for the Carmody family, making the other telegram boys jealous, since they always tip a shilling. Apparently, there is a chance Theresa Carmody would answer the door. The 17-year-old “has the consumption and is desperate for romance”, so many of the boys do not want to deliver to them. On his way there, Frank's bike slides down from under him and he scrapes his face and tears open the back of his hand. Theresa invites Frank over to treat his wounds and offers him some tea, as well as some time to dry next to a fireplace.

McCourt masterfully describes his feelings with the help of a messy sentence structure, hinting at how confusing and chaotic many of his experiences and thought processes were, including the loss of his virginity.

She puts the plate and the cups on the table by the fire where they stay. With her thumb and forefinger she takes the tip of my excitement and leads me across the room to a green sofa against the wall and all the time my head is filled with sin and iodine and fear of consumption and the shilling tip and her green eyes and she's on the sofa don't stop or I'll die and she's crying and I'm crying for I don't know what's happening to me if I'm killing myself catching 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. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 324)

Frank visits Theresa in the following weeks and sometimes they have “the excitement” on the sofa, other times Theresa has a cough and it breaks Frank to see her get weaker. She never tells him she has the consumption and Frank never tells the other telegram boys he stopped taking the shilling tip from her.

Theresa is sent to the hospital and Frank goes to the Franciscan church to pray for her, asking St. Francis to tell God the excitement was not her fault and to take the consumption away, since he loves Theresa but will not go near her again.

Theresa eventually dies and Frank begs for the repose of Theresa's soul, praying to the statues, stained glass windows, and the Stations of the Cross. He goes to four masses and says rosaries all day. He swears to lead a life of faith, hope and charity, poverty, chastity, and obedience. The next day, he follows the funeral riding on his post office bicycle.

I want to tell them how I'm the one who sent Theresa to hell. They can do whatever they like with me. Abuse me. Revile me. Throw grave dirt at me. But I stay

behind the tree till the mourners leave and the grave diggers fill in the grave.

Frost is already whitening the fresh earth 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.

It's getting dark. I walk my bicycle out of the graveyard. I have telegrams to deliver. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 325)

Frank earns extra money by writing letters for Brigid Finucane. He uses lofty words to threaten the people owing her money. The vocabulary he uses gradually becomes less coherent to even Frank himself.

Dear Mrs. O'Brien,

Inasmuch as you have not succumbed to the imminence of litigation in our precious epistle be advised that we are in consultation with our barrister above in Dublin. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 333)

Frank delivers the letters himself and keeps the money he is given for stamps. His methods work, as Mrs. O'Brien comes paying with tears in her eyes, trembling. At the post, the boys under 16 years old are considered temporary workers. In order to become permanent delivery boys, they need to take an exam which Frank refused to do, since he was warned he would remain a postman and stay in Limerick for the rest of his life.

When boys reach 16 years of age, their fathers take them for their first pint. It was Uncle Pa who took Frank for his. He returns home drunk and falls out with his mother, who compares him to his father. Frank says he would rather be like his father than Laman Griffin and ends up slapping his mother.

The next day, Frank visits the church of St. Francis, frustrated with the lack of his patron's help. Father Gregory gently offers him a listening ear so Frank summarizes his life's troubles to St. Francis and Father Gregory. After a few minutes of silent prayers, Father Gregory reassures Frank that Theresa, one of his biggest troubles, had gone to heaven.

An English newspaper, *John O'London*, has an advertisement page about birth control, which had been a taboo topic at that time in Ireland. Frank and his co-workers spend the entire afternoon going around shops tearing out pages sixteen which include the advertisement. Frank hides a good portion of them and sells them the next day.

Towards the end of the book, Frank's life stories get rather general, as if reflecting the seriousness of adult life. Malachy gets a job at a garage and his mother takes care of an old man, Mr. Sliney. Over time, Frank's coworkers leave, and he becomes a senior boy. He indulges in reading English, Irish, and American magazines, and papers. Malachy ends up getting a job in the gas works, shoveling coal into the furnaces like Uncle Pa Keating and both brothers dream of going to America.

A month before Frank's nineteenth birthday, Mrs. Finucane, for whom he wrote the threatening letters, dies. Frank finds her after she sends him for a bottle of sherry. Frank helps himself to a roll of money from her trunk, earning himself enough money for his journey to America. On his way out, he takes the sherry bottle and her ledger. He sits by the River Shannon sipping Mrs. Finucane's sherry. Before throwing the ledger in the river, he finds Aunt Aggie's name in it with the debt of nine pounds. Assuming Aunt Aggie borrowed the money for his clothes, he heaves it in the river, saving Aunt Aggie and several other people of Limerick from their debt.

Frank contemplates whether he should wait a year for Malachy to go with him, but he had already paid his forty-five pounds for the ship fare. Angela says they should have a party before he leaves. Such parties were called "American wakes" as the people expected to never meet again with the people going to America in this lifetime.

I have strange feelings and sometimes when I'm sitting by the fire with Mam and my brothers I feel tears coming and I'm ashamed of myself for being weak. At first Mam laughs and tells me, Your bladder must be near your eye, but then Michael says, We'll all go to America, Dad will be there, Malachy will be there and we'll all be together, and she gets the tears herself and we sit there, the four of us, like weeping eejits. (*Angela's Ashes*, page 357)

After a night of singing accompanied by an eclipse, Frank gets onto the ship and reminisces about what he is leaving behind. Eventually, they pass New York and rest at Poughkeepsie. After dark a small boat approaches the ship because of its Irish flag and a man by the name of Tim Boyle invites the passengers to a party in a nearby house, which the Americans notably pronounce "pawty" and Frank expects he will eventually start talking like them.

Among the crew is a priest so everyone remains rather restrained at the party. Nevertheless, Frank still manages to have sex with Frieda, one of the "bad women" present there. The house is huge, there is a living room—a new type of room for Frank—and a bathroom, not a lavatory.

After they return to their ship, the Wireless Officer tells Frank: "My God, that was a lovely night, Frank. Isn't this a great country altogether?" to which Frank responds in the next and last chapter with a single word: "'Tis."

3.3 *'Tis*

3.3.1 *'Tis*: Introduction

[T]his is one splendid book despite its inevitable comparison with its predecessor, and not only for the wonderfully human tales McCourt continues to narrate (and the wonderful way he narrates them), but because he sees the differences between America and the rest of the world (including other English-speaking countries) as few Americans can see her by themselves, and knows how to communicate what he sees — and that really is where the chief value of this book exists.¹⁴

Named after the last word used in *Angela's Ashes*, *'Tis* is McCourt's second memoir first published in 1999. Just like in *Angela's Ashes*, the storytelling in *'Tis* feels both vivid and definite, though this time, McCourt recollects memories from his adult life, providing the events of the memoir with more credibility.

McCourt's personality and its development shine through, sharing critical thoughts on taboo topics such as sex, racism, and censorship. For instance, he points out the strange avoidance of the topic of death and questions the purity of Catholic priests after an incident with a priest in New York. He touches upon topics current back then, as well as now. For instance, being American often not being enough for one's identity. At other times, McCourt touches upon gender roles, subtly questioning them.

One day they're insulting your mother, the next day they're bragging their own mothers are Irish. Why is it the minute I open my mouth the whole world is telling me they're Irish and we should all have a drink? It's not enough to be American. You always have to be something else, Irish-American, German-American, and you'd wonder how they'd get along if someone hadn't invented the hyphen. (*'Tis*, page 84)

Women will bring in their new babies and all the other women will rush over to tickle them and say, Isn't she just beautiful? Got your eyes, Miranda, definitely got your eyes. Men will say, Hi Miranda. Looking good. Nice kid. That's all they can say because men are not supposed to be enthusiastic or excited over babies. (*'Tis*, page 150)

McCourt also shares his thoughts on the topic of religion since it played a role in the importance of most Irish writers—Mccourt had not heard of several famous Irish writers until his university years in New York due to the writers being Protestant and ignored in Catholic schools in Ireland (*'Tis*, page 137). Since these opinions were vastly unpopular back in their time, it can be questioned how credible McCourt's recollection of his past self may be.

Regarding credibility, it feels suspicious that he recalls the described conversations and events in such detail. For instance, on his first day of teaching, he names the teachers to whom he was introduced in order and remembers their conversations during lunch (*'Tis*, page 211).

¹⁴ Schenk, Leslie. *'Tis*. *World Literature Today; Summer 2000; 74, 3; Literature Online*, p. 604

The frequent repetition of phrases suggests the usage of hyperbole. For instance, the mention of “Michael what’s left of him” could suggest the connotation to be often used, yet McCourt adds it behind every mention of Mrs. Klein’s son Michael. The number of total mentions of “Michael what’s left of him” adds up to twenty-one.

Generally, McCourt repeats important issues multiple times in various ways—for instance, when dreaming of going to college, he repeatedly mentions how “grand” it would be to carry around books, namely *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoyevsky, to go to lectures, sit on campus and discuss what literature he is reading.

McCourt once again gives life to the characters appearing in his memoirs with distinct ways of speaking, suggesting accurate memories of the various people he has met throughout his life, or, as stated previously in this thesis, a confident depiction of the impression they left in him. Many examples can be found throughout this thesis’s quotations—though McCourt does not hold back when it comes to accents or vulgar terms, which adds to his authenticity. The vivid storytelling transports the reader into McCourt’s past mind, observing his distant thought process and plans.

When they’re not talking about their averages the students argue about the meaning of everything, life, the existence of God, the terrible state of the world, and you never know when someone is going to drop in the one word that gives everyone the deep serious look, existentialism. They might talk about how they want to be doctors and lawyers till one throws up his hands and declares everything is meaningless, that the only person in the world who makes any sense is Albert Camus who says your most important act every day is deciding not to commit suicide.

...

The only thing to do is finish my coffee and grilled cheese sandwich and go to the library to look up existentialism and find out what makes Camus so sad, just in case. (*Tis*, pages 141-142)

McCourt’s life is full of contrasting events, which he writes about casually.

I could never tell the world about the weekends in Munich where I consorted with the lowest whores in Germany or the time when I was fourteen and a half frolicking with a dying girl on a green sofa in Limerick. (*Tis*, page 249)

McCourt’s use of metonyms is prolific. After writing how he is afraid to go to confessions for fear of his sins being too severe, he avers: “This is when the dark clouds flutter like bats in my head and I wish I could open a window and release them” (*Tis*, page 76). The image of clouds and darkness appear throughout the book, including the night of his mother’s death. Clearly, these specific weather metonyms are repeated since it rains nearly every day in Ireland.

The work does a great job of portraying the people who made an impact on McCourt’s life, as well as McCourt’s own personality and imagery. His teaching style also shows crucial development but is not as delved into, foreshadowing that teaching may become the plot point of McCourt’s third and final memoir, *Teacher Man*.

3.3.2 *Tis*: Summary

The book's prologue deals with McCourt's recollection of his "American dream". His mother used to say "That's your dream out now" whenever a dream of her children would come true. One dream McCourt repeatedly had was about the New York skyscrapers. He was rather protective of it, quarreling with his siblings whenever they would claim they had those dreams as well.

I appealed to my mother. I told her it wasn't fair the way the whole family was invading my dreams and she said, Arrah, for the love o' God, drink your tea and go to school and stop tormenting us with your dreams. My brother Alphie was only two and learning words and he banged a spoon on the table and chanted, Tormentin' dreams, tormentin' dreams, till everyone laughed and I knew I could share my dreams with him anytime, so why not with Michael, why not Malachy? (*Tis*, page 12)

Among his first memories, McCourt remembers his journey to America, speaking of how the first officer would tell them instead of New York they would go to Montreal, which two days later changed to New York again, only for the course to set to Albany in another two days. On one occasion, the first officer insults Limerick and McCourt feels the urge to fight him, but then acknowledges Limerick is not a place worth defending. During the journey, McCourt tries to imagine the streets of New York and the lush way of life. However, his mind keeps wandering to the miserable way of life in Limerick, remembering the life filled with dirt, pubs, hunger, poverty, and masses. He attended masses during which he wished to be all grown up, standing at the back with the men, his uncle Pa Keating and laughing behind his hand about him devoting himself to the Virgin Mary if she handed him a "lovely creamy black pint of porter" (*Tis*, page 14). Despite the grey misery, he cries to the memories of his life in Ireland, surrounded by the "gorgeous Atlantic" and the city of his dreams ahead.

One of the passengers is a priest, with whom McCourt has issues as talking to him is like talking to "God Himself" (*Tis*, page 16). This priest serves as the prime showcase of critique of the clergy in this memoir. Apart from him, there is a rich couple, and the priest encourages McCourt to talk to them in hopes of obtaining employment from them. However, McCourt never talked to rich people apart from when he was delivering telegrams to them. He also compares himself to his brother Malachy, whose charisma would allegedly make him the rich couple's adopted son.

Additionally, he is self-conscious about his bad teeth, saying having them mended would be the first thing he would do when he made some money in New York, as New York was filled with people with well-kept teeth.

During the journey, the passengers are not supposed to talk to the sailors, but one particular sailor, Owen, ends up chatting with McCourt when he sees him reading *Crime and Punishment*, recommending him reading Dostoyevsky, which later the priest criticizes, saying no

job will require him to read Dostoyevsky. According to him, it was strange McCourt had no trouble talking to the sailor with a problematic past but would not talk to the rich couple which would have been much more beneficial. Reading *Crime and Punishment* makes McCourt feel a sense of guilt, as he remembers the time he took money from Mrs. Finucane after she died in his company.

Once they arrive at Albany, McCourt accompanies the priest to New York City. He gets to eat lemon meringue pie for the first time and looks forward to eating pie for the hunger, reading Dostoyevsky for the loneliness and being fine and fat, as they say in Limerick. On their way by train, he is shocked to see it packed with people—in Limerick, there would be about five people sharing a carriage. College kids are travelling with them, and the priest explains that the “church key” they are looking for is a bottle opener. McCourt ends up imagining what life would be like as a college student, carrying great books and smiling with “teeth like snow drops” (*Tis*, page 19).

Not knowing where to go from the Grand Central Station, McCourt accompanies the priest for a dinner and a hotel stay, where he learns about hamburgers and fries, and more pronunciation nuances. He embarrasses himself on a few occasions, like using a bathmat as a towel.

I’m shaking my head at myself feeling if this is the way it’s going to be in America I’m sorry I ever left Ireland. It’s hard enough coming here in the first place without priests criticizing you over your failure to hit it off with rich Kentucky Protestants, your ignorance of bath mats, the state of your underwear and your doubts about aftershave lotion. (*Tis*, page 21)

McCourt is shocked to discover that the priest does not pray before going to bed, into which he lays naked. This makes him ponder how the pope goes to sleep and changes in general. The following day, the priest finds him a room for six dollars a week and takes him to the headquarters of the Democratic Party, where he is certain to get employed. In the elevator, they meet “the great Boss Flynn from the Bronx, the most powerful man in America next to President Truman”, who picks his nose and flicks the snot on the carpet.

McCourt is annoyed and tempted to say De Valera would never pick his nose like that and the Bishop of Limerick would not go to sleep naked but holds his tongue for fear of the priest going on about the rich Protestants from Kentucky and “missing the opportunity of a lifetime” (*Tis*, page 23). Eventually, McCourt is given a job at the Biltmore Hotel and the two go to another dinner together.

The priest drinks his double martini and orders another with his steak. He tells me I should think of becoming a priest. He could get me a job in Los Angeles and I’d live the life of Riley with widows dying and leaving me everything including their daughters, ha ha ha, this is one hell of a martini excuse the language. (*Tis*, page 23)

The priest has more to drink and ends up passing out, further bringing disrepute to the Catholic Church. After McCourt takes the priest's wallet to pay the restaurant check and the taxi, he drags him to their hotel room, where the priest runs to the bathroom for a long time and afterwards undresses, lies on the bed touching himself, inviting McCourt to come to him. After McCourt refuses, the priest rolls out of bed and attempts to grab his hand and put it on him, but McCourt backs away, running to the elevator. The 19-year-old McCourt acknowledges the Father's sexual behavior to be sinful and likely to be regarded as abusive.

Not that I'm in a state of grace myself, no I'm not, but you'd expect a priest to set a good example and not make a holy show of himself my second night in America. I have to step into the elevator and pretend I don't hear the priest slobbering and crying, naked at the door of his room. (*'Tis*, page 26)

That night, he walks to his rented room. The following day, the priest calls the landlady, Mrs. Austin, to make him come get his suitcase. When McCourt appears at the doorstep, the priest is sitting on the bed, facing him with his back, telling him to take the suitcase and leave. He then blames McCourt for the previous night, saying if he had gone off with the rich Protestants from Kentucky, these objectionable acts would not have happened. McCourt acknowledges the injustice by thinking if he got drunk and bothered other people, he would take the blame. However, he admits it must be hard listening to other people's confessions when priests become average people after having a drink, stating he could never become a priest.

Not knowing what to do until his job starts next Monday, he goes to a pub and meets a man who encourages him to seek out the library and read *The Lives of English Poets*. Following the advice, he visits the library by which he is taken aback. The librarians are encouraging and admire him for wanting to read Samuel Johnson, and the library is full of people reading. McCourt is in awe from the amount of books he could never manage to read in his entire lifetime.

In his apartment, he ends up reading until eleven at night at which time he is prompted to turn the lights off in order to keep the electricity bill low. His neighbor, Tom Clifford, invites him for a beer, and they end up going to a non-Irish bar as Tom Clifford hates the Irish despite growing up in Cork. Tom has no issues talking to girls, but McCourt struggles. He ends up inviting a girl over but is refused and insulted for his looks and his lack of a high school diploma.

In his job, he is told not to talk to hotel customers and to try to behave as if he was invisible. There are his peers coming to the hotel, but McCourt is ashamed to respond to the ladies' greetings and returning smiles. The headwaiter, or maître d', tells him to return anything valuable he might find. Maître d' is also someone he is afraid of being reported to whenever he interferes with himself in a toilet cubicle after the girls take off their coats.

He decides to go see *Hamlet* in the cinema. Coincidentally, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* is the only book he brought from Ireland. The plot reminds him of the time his mother had to deal with Laman Griffin and says if he were to return to Limerick soon enough, he

would “wipe the floor with him till he begged for mercy” (*Tis*, page 32). Allegedly, not even God himself would make him forgive Laman for what he had done to his mother.

At the cinema, he tries to eat pie and drink ginger ale he smuggled in under his raincoat. In that moment, the man sitting next to him slips part of his raincoat over his lap and lets his hand wander under it, making McCourt excuse himself and take his refreshments to the lavatory. There, he eats a bit of his pie, but cuts himself on the bottle, making a mess. A gentleman walks in, criticizes McCourt for eating there, and later sends an usher there, who throws McCourt out. In an ironic turn of events, McCourt is called a pervert by the usher who assumed he wore a raincoat to masturbate there in secret.

McCourt touches upon racism at work. As an Irish immigrant, he is ranked just above the “Puerto Rican dishwashers”, who are criticized for their cheerful nature. According to Eddie Gilligan, the union shop steward, all they aspire to do is ignore learning English and make enough money to return to Puerto Rico. There, their children will spend their money to go to New York to wash the dishes, repeating the cycle.

He struggles with Thursdays and Fridays when his peers meet at the hotel lobby. His eyes are sore and infected and the people make insulting remarks on his name. He recalls a disrespectful story in which a girl is searching for a paper napkin with a telephone number from a Princeton boy. Since he likely took the napkin away, according to the maître d’, he must find it or he will be in trouble. After searching the bins for a bit, he ends up scribbling a made-up telephone number on a napkin he dirties and turns in. The maître d’ receives a dollar tip from the girl and McCourt’s “only sorrow is that he won’t be there when she calls that number”.

His sore eyes make people around him uncomfortable, so his employer makes him see a doctor, who concludes he has infectious dandruff which keeps falling in his eyes. McCourt accordingly needs to have his head shaved. At work, he is sent off the lobby because of making people even more uncomfortable with his infected eyes and bald head.

McCourt describes conversations between people in vivid detail. Eddie Gilligan and his brother Joe work on the nineteenth floor with him, as well as Digger Moon, the “carpetman”.

Now Digger Moon strolls up with a huge carpet on his shoulder and tells Eddie something has to be done about his brother, Joe, that that poor son-of-a-bitch is suffering more than seven Indian tribes and Digger knows something about suffering after his stint with the infantry all over the goddam Pacific when he was hit with everything the Japs could throw at him, malaria, everything. Eddie says, Yeah, yeah, he knows about Joe and he’s sorry, after all it’s his brother, but he has his own troubles with his wife and her miscarriages and blood infection and his own gut messed up from not being put back right and he worries about Joe and the way he mixes alcohol and all kinds of painkillers. Mr. Carey belches and groans and Digger says, You still eating shit? because Digger isn’t afraid of Mr. Carey or anyone else. (*Tis*, page 45)

Another topic the memoir touches upon is war—Eddie Gilligan talks about his experience on Omaha Beach, where a cigarette gave him enough relief while waiting for the medics. He has

been smoking ever since. Digger Moon talks about his experience of being Indian and shares his theories about men being useless to women after they have given birth, concluding men were only made to paint their faces, ride horses, throw spears and kill warriors from the other tribes.

McCourt also points out the differences in the way of life regarding death. In the US, people do not “die”, they “pass away” or “are deceased”. Moreover, their “body” is called the “remains”. He is also surprised no one sings, tells a story or drinks at a funeral. The Americans also allegedly do not like using the words “coffin”, “buried”, and “graveyard”, saying “casket” and “cemetery” instead.

Since Frank is still bald and Mrs. Austin, the landlady, does not want him to walk around freely in such a state, he spends a lot of time thinking in his apartment. He remembers his school headmaster Mr. O’Halloran, who used to say, “Your mind is a treasure house that you should stock well and it’s the one part of you the world can’t interfere with” (*Tis*, page 46), indicating respect for his former teacher’s ideas.

He concludes that America is disappointing. Since he sends more than a third of his wage to his family in Limerick, he ends up with barely enough money to get by. He imagines he could not complain about this to his family, since American movies never show the truly poor people—the depicted poor people still seem much better off than an average Irish person. Since he cannot afford a flashlight, he indulges in turning his mind wanders into movies. The 5-hour time difference makes him imagine his family and dog sleeping peacefully, the people shuffling through the streets later in the morning. He can wander through the churches, shops, pubs, graveyards, lanes and see the women trying to start fires. Even though he is brought to tears, he finds the experience magical.

I’d like to empty out the lanes of Limerick and bring all the poor people to America and put them in houses with heat and give them warm clothes and shoes and let them stuff themselves with porridge and sausages. Some day I’ll make millions and I’ll bring the poor people to America and send them back to Limerick fat-arsed and waddling up and down O’Connell Street in light colors.

I can do anything I like in this bed, anything. I can dream about Limerick or I can interfere with myself even if it’s a sin, and Mrs. Austin will never know. No one will ever know unless I go to confession and I’m too doomed for that. (*Tis*, page 47)

In another instance, he writes about the occasion of fire happening, criticizing the police by saying that during the fire the “cops will tell everyone to move back. That’s the main job of cops in New York, telling everyone move back” (*Tis*, page 48). The real hero remains the fireman, and in this particular instance, where McCourt was present, he was celebrated for saving a curly baby girl, by which McCourt shows yet another example of a memory of particular details.

McCourt first mentions a TV set when Mrs. Austin, the Swedish landlady, talks about her husband, Eugene, who allegedly died of obesity and stress from worrying about the world’s state as portrayed on TV. She invites McCourt to spend Christmas Eve with her sister, Hannah.

On Christmas Eve, McCourt and his coworkers are invited for a drink. Since the place is crowded, he and Jerry Kerrisk end up going to a bar and despite feeling guilty for spending money his mother desperately needs, McCourt ends up getting drunk just like his father and embarrassing himself by throwing up in the streets. He praises Jerry for his carefree and determined persona.

I wish I could be like him but there's always some dark cloud at the back of my head, Swedish women waiting for me with glug, or a letter from my mother saying thanks for the few dollars, Michael and Alphie will have shoes and we'll have a nice goose for Christmas with the help of God and His Blessed Mother. She never mentions she needs shoes for herself and once I think of that I know I'll have another dark cloud at the back of my head. ('Tis, page 53)

Afterwards, the men say their goodbyes and McCourt heads home, remembering the Swedish dinner awaiting him.

The thought of it makes me puke all over again there on the street and people passing by, frantic with Christmas, make sounds of disgust and step away from me, telling their little children, Don't look at that disgusting man. He's drunk. I want to tell them, please don't turn the little children against me. I want to tell them this is not a habit I have. There are clouds at the back of my head, my mother has a goose, at least, but she needs shoes. ('Tis, page 53)

Hannah Austin, who is married to an Irishman, insults the Irish and Frank despite him having brought doughnuts instead of the expected alcohol. After drinking some wine and eating fish, McCourt ends up throwing up again and while cleaning up after himself, Hannah flirts with him. However, McCourt only walks back to his room, excited to not have to listen to her anymore.

The following day, both Mrs. Austin and Hannah come to remind him they did not appreciate his behavior on Christmas Eve. Not wanting to spend the day reading *Crime and Punishment*, he decides to go to mass, hoping that the company of happy Catholics will cheer him up. However, he mistakenly goes to a section reserved for regular attendees and after being kicked out, he leaves embarrassed.

There's a Chock Full o' Nuts a few blocks away and that's where I have a bowl of pea soup, a nutted cheese on raisin bread, a cup of coffee, a doughnut with white sugar and a read of the *Journal-American* that someone left behind.

It's only two in the afternoon and I don't know what to do with myself when all the libraries are closed. People walking by with children by the hand might think I have nowhere to go so I keep my head up and walk up one street and down the other as if I were rushing for a turkey dinner. I wish I could open a door somewhere and have people say, Oh, hi, Frank, you're just in time. ('Tis, page 56)

After returning home, Mrs. Austin apologizes and invites him for dinner. They end up watching television and McCourt falls asleep, waking up twenty minutes past four in the morning. Mrs. Austin is letting out little cries for Eugene, her late husband, making McCourt ponder how not even the visit from one's sister can take away a person's loneliness. He is comforted knowing

his family is together eating a goose, and next year, when he's promoted, they will be strolling Limerick in new shoes.

The priest who interfered with McCourt returns after four months and invites him for dinner. Since McCourt is informed about the invitation through his workplace, it would be suspicious to refuse it. The priest acts as if McCourt was at blame for the incident, jokingly telling the waiter to not bring any alcohol to McCourt. After their encounter, the priest returns to Los Angeles for good.

There are days the rain is so heavy I have to spend a dime on the subway and I see people my own age with books and bags that say Columbia, Fordham, NYU, City College, and I know I want to be one of them, a student. (page 59)

McCourt's neighbor, Tom, finds an apartment and asks McCourt to live with him, since the rent would be the same—six dollars a week—and they would not have Mrs. Austin watching them when they bring in food, drink, and girls.

There are Irish dances at the Caravan, the Tuxedo, the Leitrim House, the Sligo House. Tom won't go to the Irish dances. He wants to meet German girls because of his three happy years in Germany and because he's able to speak German. He says the Irish can kiss his ass and I don't understand that because every time I hear Irish music I feel tears coming and I want to be standing on the banks of the Shannon looking at swans. (*Tis*, page 61)

McCourt often gets flashbacks from his time in Ireland. For instance, cleaning the toilet bowls reminds him of the time he cleaned Laman Griffin's chamber pot. His second employer, a Greek who allows him to make an extra two dollars a day, says anyone who knows English should not be cleaning toilet bowls and instead get education.

The 20-year-old McCourt gets to meet more girls thanks to his friend Tom. He shows his nervousness by writing out a 16-line long sentence from when he danced with a girl named Emer. A similarly written passage could be traced to *Angela's Ashes* where he described his first time with Theresa.

War breaks out in Korea in 1950, and he reports to Whitehall Street to see if he is fit to join the U.S. Army. During the inspection, they are told to strip naked and further humiliated by having to "milk their cocks" and "open their arses for inspection". Anyone blushing is questioned about his sexuality. McCourt's vision problems do not pose an issue. However, the state of his teeth is frowned upon. Still, he is drafted.

There, he shares the hardships of the training and the evening talks of his platoon, during which the other men were sharing their excitement about returning to their girlfriends and "getting laid" with any girl they encounter. McCourt has no reason to join these conversations but does not mind, since he is able to get more rest after the excruciating training.

An old army corporal named Dunphy helps McCourt clean his rifle and lends him his favorite book *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* by James T. Farrell. Thanks to his help, McCourt becomes the colonel's orderly the next day. If he performs well, he would get a three-day pass and could go to New York to "get laid". During the day, most of his time is spent waiting and listening to the colonel's driver, whose monologue McCourt remembers in great detail.

He's from Maine and he's a Congregationalist and proud of it and doesn't hold with foreign relations. His second cousin married a Catholic and she had to move out of the state to Boston which is crawling with Catholics all leaving their money to the Pope and those cardinals who like little boys. (*Tis*, page 69)

He is dismissed at two p.m. and has three hours until "chow time", during which he reads, listens to the jukebox and dreams of Emer who he would take out to dinner, a movie, and an Irish dance. Coincidentally, he is to celebrate his 21st birthday during said weekend.

However, when he is to get his pass, he is asked to pick up a cigarette butt, to which he responds he does not smoke. As a result, he is taken to dig a hole and bury his pass. Despite still hoping to get a replacement one, he is sent to clean greased pans and decides to keep his mouth shut as anything he says makes matters worse.

On a call with Emer, he is frustrated. Emer asks when he will be back, that they "have a little cake and everything". McCourt responds she may never see him with the number of hours at "KP" he is given for each spot of grease he leaves on the pots and pans.

Dunphy, the corporal who advised him to clean his rifle with warm water and soap, invites him for drinks that Sunday, where he shares he had a wife and two daughters, but they moved to his wife's parents to Indiana. According to Frank, he is an avid drinker.

I could be with Monica making dinner, me with my feet up, taking a little nap in my top sergeant's uniform. Okay, kid, let's go. Let's get outa here and see if I can straighten my shit and go to Indiana.

Halfway to the barracks he changes his mind and goes back for more beer and I know from this he'll never get to Indiana. He's like my father and when I'm in my bunk I wonder if my father remembered the twenty-first birthday of his oldest son, if he raised his glass to me in a pub in Coventry.

I doubt it. My father is like Dunphy who will never see Indiana. (*Tis*, page 74)

Sent to Europe, McCourt is assigned a dog named Ivan with whom he becomes an "asshole buddy", as they first do not like each other. In the end, McCourt is the only person who can remove Ivan's muzzle without "losing a hand". After their six weeks together, he is sent to Company clerk school to replace Corporal George Shemanski, who is given furlough. He would rather stay with Ivan, but Shemanski claims he should be thanking him "for getting him away from the dogs and into a job which might be useful in civilian life. He says I should be happy I learned to type, I might write another *Gone With the Wind* some day, ha ha ha" (*Tis*, page 81).

Before Shemanski leaves for furlough, his German girlfriend, Ruth, invites McCourt over and they sleep together. Mentioned with no sense of shame, McCourt states that Shemanski was sent on this Earth to destroy him, as he had to leave hurriedly through the window into a pile of snow.

He still sends half his salary to his mother, and the allotment clerk, Davis, insults his mother, making McCourt lash out. He is sent to the captain, who is also Irish and sympathizes with him. Davis is ordered to not make comments of such like. He then apologizes to McCourt and admits he sends allotment to his Irish mother as well. According to McCourt, it is this first time anyone has ever apologized to him.

When McCourt is made supply clerk, he gets to travel outside the Munich concentration camp to bring company bedding to the military laundry. One of the places he gets to see is Dachau, where he touches the infamous ovens and says a prayer. He gets to meet displaced Hungarian, Czech, Yugoslavian, and Romanian refugees. After witnessing the ovens, he is given Hungarian goulash, but he pushes the plate away. People in Limerick would despise such behavior, but he cannot get over the image of people, especially children, being burned and “thrown over to the side like dogs”, stating whenever he would be served goulash in the future, he would remember this image.

They are given cigarettes and coffee and use it to trade for sex in a refugee camp, as “getting laid” is said to keep one sane. McCourt gives his whole cigarette pack and coffee to one of the young women after she empties herself into a bucket in the corner, which again reminds him of his days in Limerick. Only his coworker Rappaport is against their “trade” and gets into a fight with another colleague named Weber. McCourt’s only worry is for the laundry not to get dirty.

After this event, he gets mumps and is warned he may never have children himself. He is put into a hospital, where he witnesses a conversation between his orderly and one of the other patients, where they reveal they are “fairies”—homosexuals. McCourt’s point of interest is *Crime and Punishment*, which he can finally continue reading. While reading, however, once again, he is reminded of his sin of stealing money from Mrs. Finucane.

McCourt gets two weeks off and returns to Ireland. On his way back, he cries due to his indescribable feelings. His mother, with her new teeth, leads him towards their old home, which is suspicious, as she wrote to Frank that she got a new house and was looking forward to buying furniture and taking care of the garden. Apparently, she did not get electricity yet, and wanted McCourt to spend one last night in their grandmother’s house, which he refuses. After accommodating himself at a hotel, he reflects on his life in Limerick. Browsing through various scenarios, he decides to visit his mother after all—especially since he did not want to disappoint his brothers. On his way there, he gives change to boys who reminded him of his younger self. Everyone in the lane welcomes him and says he looks and smells “grand”.

He compares the Limerick way of life to the American. He is ashamed to see his 14-year-old brother dirtied with grease from washing the dishes at work, saying if he were in America, he would be playing rugby and going to Kilkee on his holidays.

After visiting Aunt Aggie, he admits to himself he admires Uncle Pa for his honesty and is saddened he is “killing himself” by smoking, although he would not admit it openly for fear of someone laughing at him. He ends up sleeping at his old house. The next day, Angela begs her brother Pat to move to the new house with them, but he refuses. McCourt does not understand why Angela would want to take care of her simple brother and does not understand what his mother means by saying he is lucky all his brothers are “whole”—not mentally disabled.

McCourt expected to be admired for his uniform. However, people remember him from his youth, and he mostly gets comments about his scabby eyes getting better and questions about his poor mother. Even during one dancing event, he is laughed at despite wearing his uniform. He enjoys walking about with his brothers Alphie and Michael, who is popular for his looks. McCourt swears he will take him to America, since he is a talented dancer.

His grandmother wishes to see him, and Angela encourages him to go visit her and their father. The then 22-year-old Frank can barely hold himself back from lashing out when his grandmother and Aunt Emily reminisce and criticize Angela for moving in with her cousin, disgracing their family, sending Malachy into an even worse drinking phase. His father fails to remember his youngest son’s name. Though Frank wishes to talk to his grandmother, who he may well never see again, and his father, who finally stopped drinking, he leaves the house full of resentment. He is offered a lift to the train station and once in the car, he realizes there is no going back. Returning just one day later, he justifies his brief visit by falsely stating that his father was drinking, not wanting to hurt his mother’s feelings with the wrongs his aunt and grandmother had to say about the pair’s relationship.

After he returns to Germany, they no longer go to Dachau, since word about their visit to the refugee camp spread out. Rappaport, the one who was against the doing, confesses to telling the information to someone, and apologizes. Still, he tells McCourt to seek education.

And how long will it take me to get a high school diploma that way?
A few years.
I can’t do that. I can’t spend years working by day, going to school by night. I’d be dead in a month.
So what else are you going to do?
I don’t know.
So? Says Rappaport. (*Tis*, page 110)

He rushes back to America since his girlfriend Emer is excited for his return. She is also the only girl that has ever shown a liking for him. He finds a new job at the docks, which earns him seventy-five dollars a week. Still, he promises to Emer to get education and an office job later. However, it proves to be difficult to refuse his colleagues’ invites for a beer, and the couple

grows distant. One day, McCourt finds out Emer is engaged to an insurance man. He begs and promises to change, but she turns him away. He swears to better himself before they are to get married, but the thought of her fiancé kissing her makes him uneasy. His own affairs across Europe pose difficulties only in the sense that he would have to confess to them to a priest before marriage.

Wanting to win Emer over, McCourt applies for a job at an insurance company Blue Cross and lies about having a high school diploma. Eventually, he gives up on this career path, even though he may have issues finding a corporate job in the future. Walking around New York, he visits places he has not seen before. He ponders about the day when he came to New York almost four years ago. Grateful for his American passport, he pities the people who arrived sick and had to return to Czechoslovakia or Hungary, calling them the saddest people in all of history.

Until now, he lived in the basement of a boarding house, but his friend Tom finds a new apartment in Woodside, Queens, and offers McCourt to live with him once again. He gets his late job at the docks as well. There, he almost dies during fumigating and encounters racism through their co-worker Horace, an African American, who refuses to accompany them to certain bars to avoid stirring up trouble.

Not knowing where he is headed in life, he walks into the admissions office at the New York University and asks to be accepted, stating he read Dostoyevsky, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*, and *Moby Dick*. The Dean of Admissions calls him an unusual case and he is allowed to enroll in two classes: Introduction to Literature and the History of Education in America.

I'd like to raise my hand and tell the professor how the Irish suffered for centuries under English rule but I'm sure everyone in this class has a high school diploma and if I open my mouth they'll know I'm not one of them.

Other students are easy about raising their hands and they always say, Well, I think.

Some day I'll raise my hand and say, Well, I think, but I don't know what to think about Pilgrims and their education. ('Tis, pages 134-135)

When the students are asked to write about one author they would like to meet and why, McCourt writes about Jonathan Swift and admiring his imagination. During class, he is corrected that Swift was an English satirist author, not Irish, and then ridiculed for his simplistic approach to literature. That makes him wonder why he ever left Limerick at all, where he could have been a postman, reading Swift and enjoying it for different reasons than students at university do.

In the library, McCourt discovers a book *I Knock at the Door* by Sean O'Casey, which metaphorically opens a door to a series of Irish writers he had never heard of before—most likely because they were Protestant.

It's a book about growing up poor in Dublin and I never knew you could write about things like that. It was all right for Charles Dickens to write about poor people in

London but his books always end with characters discovering they're long-lost sons of the Duke of Somerset and everyone lives happily ever after.

There is no happily ever after in Sean O'Casey. (*Tis*, page 137)

The teacher who criticized McCourt the previous week praised him in the following class meeting, stating McCourt was the only one to choose a truly great writer. He is asked to share how he came to read Swift, and not wanting to disobey, he tells a story of how a blind man in Limerick paid his 12-year-old self to read Swift to him. The students' whispers do not show whether they are sneering at him or admiring him.

When his colleagues see him read books and talk to Horace, the African American, they call him a fairy and mock him in various ways. McCourt decides to quit and while saying goodbye to Horace, he feels a strange sense of love and wishes for him to be his father.

McCourt's friend and flat mate Tom decides to move to Detroit with the intention of working on an automobile assembly line, making it to an office, and having a blonde secretary. McCourt is faced with a choice of joining him in a carefree life, but he knows he would see students there and forever wonder what he missed by giving up on his college degree.

McCourt moves again. This time, his rent is twelve dollars a week, but he has a large room all to himself, with a small couch on which his brother Michael can sleep when he comes to America. The landlady Mrs. Agnes Klein invites him for Christmas dinner. She cooks European food, Polish pierogi, sauerkraut, and kielbasa. Apparently, her husband was Jewish and died in a concentration camp. She often remembers him and laments the state of their son Michael, "what's left of him", who survived the camp.

Every fortnight two nuns visit Mrs. Klein and clean up her and Michael. One of the nuns shares with McCourt she secretly baptized Michael and asks McCourt to say Hail Marys to him, saying that she will pray for him in return. She also wishes he would leave New York University, stating it is a "hotbed of atheistic communism" and that Mrs. Klein's troubles were caused by marrying outside of the True Faith.

There are girls in the cafeteria with names like Rachel and Naomi and they're the ones Mrs. Klein told me about, Jewish girls who are very sensual. I wish I had the courage to talk to them because they're probably like Protestant girls, all in a state of despair over the emptiness of it all, no sense of sin and ready for all kinds of sensuality. (*Tis*, page 148)

McCourt's grades are unsatisfactory while working night shifts at Merchants Refrigerating. With Mrs. Klein always waiting for him with vodka and telling him stories, he has very little time to learn. He gives up the job and seeks easier ones. He is fired from a manual job where he painted feathers meant for hat decorating due to his alleged color-blindness. He ends up using his typing skills in offices all over Manhattan, but the lack of acknowledgment makes him quit similarly to how he left Blue Cross, walking away mid-work—away from typing the lists of

Japanese dolls and people who find “anything unusual to be an excuse for a party” (*Tis*, page 150).

Michael arrives in New York so thin that McCourt wants to “fill him with hamburgers and apple pie” (*Tis*, page 152). Michael eventually joins the Air Force like their brother Malachy. Their mother has enough money from the allotment. McCourt is glad their brother Alphie does not have to think about eating eggs and being warm all the time as an overly luxurious thing.

The lecturer in English Composition, Mr. Calitri, asks for an essay on an object from the students’ childhood. The other students write about the family car, Dad’s old baseball mitt, a sled they had fun with, and other household items. McCourt finally chooses to write about their bed, thinking Mr. Calitri would be the only one reading the story. However, next week, Mr. Calitri asks McCourt whether he may read *The Bed* (see attachment 1) to the class, praising his style for being direct and the subject matter rich—laughing as he says the adjective.

He tells me I should continue to explore my rich past, and he smiles again. I don’t know what he’s talking about. I’m sorry I ever wrote about that bed and I’m afraid everyone will pity me and treat me like a charity case. (*Tis*, page 157)

McCourt moves again. The men living with him at the boarding house work on the piers and warehouses. They bring stolen canned fruits and bottles of rums and whiskey that had gotten “misplaced”. One of the nuns finds out where McCourt lives and sends him a note saying it would be nice if he came over to say good-bye to Mrs. Klein.

She takes my hand, Take care of Michael what’s left of him, won’t you, Eddie?
Eddie. I feel a fierce pain in my heart because of this and a terrible memory of Rappaport and the laundry at Dachau and I wonder if I’ll ever know anything in the world but darkness. Will I ever know what Sister Beatrice promised Michael what’s left of him, birds, flowers, trees and a risen Lord? (*Tis*, page 162)

McCourt’s friend Paddy Arthur McGovern invites him to an Irish dance, where he meets with Dolores, a girl he feels comfortable dancing with. He offers to walk her home with the hope of “excitement”, the term Mikey Molloy from Limerick would use. He prefers it to Paddy’s “I’ll be gettin’ me hole tonight”. On the way to Dolores’ place, he finds out she has a boyfriend in the Navy and becomes sad that everyone around him secretly seems to have a partner. Dolores has her Nick, and Mike, an attractive girl from his university, has her football player Bob. Still, they both talk to him in a way that gives McCourt some hope for a future relationship. He’s twenty-four years old and everyone still calls him a boy, which bothers him.

He starts working at a bank and finds out about their co-workers changing the applications in favor of the oppressed classes. According to the co-workers, it is unfair that the bank would accept loans for people who want to go on a vacation but not for single mothers who need to take care of their children.

His love interest, Alberta “Mike” Small, invites him to her house, and some cultural differences take him aback. In Limerick, he was used to people offering tea and sitting their guests down, yet Mike leaves him in the room with her father and grandmother, which he finds displeasing and awkward. He also negatively comments on Mike’s grandmother taking a rest on the couch, which Mike later reproaches him for. McCourt wants to reply that her grandmother has nothing to complain about with enough money and running water but keeps his mouth shut in case it offends Mike. He finds it hard to not openly “say the truth” as they do in Ireland.

During summer, McCourt works at the warehouse. He goes to the Port Warehouse to meet up with Horace, who just happened to get food from the diner. They take a detour on their way to the pier where they want to eat, because Horace does not want his co-workers to pick on him for hanging out with McCourt and asking whether he knew McCourt’s mother. McCourt wants to defy them, but Horace convinces him to save the energy for “bigger things”.

This is a big thing, Horace.
It’s nothing, mon. It’s ignorance.
We should fight back.
No, son.
God, he’s calling me son. (*Tis*, pages 182-183)

The interaction, which McCourt recalls in great detail—what they ate and drank, the seagulls and music playing in the background—brings him to tears. Horace offers a white handkerchief and McCourt tells himself he’ll “keep that handkerchief till his last breath” (*Tis*, page 183).

The cocktail parties he goes to with Mike bore him since there is no singing and storytelling like in Limerick. McCourt prefers to visit downtown New York where people like Kerouac, Ginsberg and Brigid Murnaghan read poetry in coffeehouses and bars. He and Mike fall out when McCourt refuses to wear a tie, making Mike go on her own. A few days later, Mike calls him crying, saying her father hit her when she said she would go meet up with Frank. She ends up moving in Mary O’Brien’s, where McCourt lives. He takes Mike’s virginity and since they cannot resist the temptation of sharing a bed, which is frowned upon, they move out, each to their own apartment.

McCourt finishes his B.A. degree at NYU in the summer of 1957. He is warned to not accept a job at Vocational Schools, but in March of 1958, there is a notice of Vacancy for an English teacher at McKee Vocational and Technical High School. McCourt applies and is given classes in Social Studies, Economic Citizenship, and English. For the first two, he is told to stay a few pages ahead of the children in their textbooks. The teacher he is replacing seems oblivious and happy to retire, saying he will need luck to teach the kids and would be better off working with chimpanzees in the Bronx Zoo.

His first words as a teacher are “Stop throwing sandwiches”. He finds it difficult to decide what type of teacher he wants to be and has trouble dealing with students’ innuendos. The students do not respect his commands and McCourt gets criticized for not disciplining them enough. The students try to divert his attention by asking about his life in Ireland.

How about high school, Mr. McCourt?

I didn’t go.

Sebastian says, Yeah, it shows. And I promise myself, I’ll get you later, you little bastard.
(*Tis*, page 219)

During this time, McCourt struggles to pay the electricity bills and relies on an extension cord from his neighbor Bradford who, albeit reluctant, let his extension cord be plugged in even after moving away, providing McCourt with free electricity for months. While McCourt struggles with teaching, he believes his brothers Malachy and Michael took the easy route. Despite wanting to join them, he admits he could not allow himself to give up on teaching.

He discovers old essays from 1942 in the class closets. Several of the authors are the students’ family members. Back then, they “yearned to fight, to avenge the deaths of brothers, friends, neighbors” (*Tis*, page 232), and the stories get the students emotional. In the following months, they all rewrite the stories captured on the crumbling papers in order to preserve them.

His brothers exploit Frank’s hospitality by sending him their acquaintances who have no place to stay. One of them, Bill Galetly, constantly starves himself, preaches philosophy, and only eats bananas. During this time, Alberta leaves McCourt, saying she would like to settle down and have a family. McCourt realizes their ideal ways of living clash, as he would prefer to live more spontaneously. McCourt, despite being a teacher for only a year at that time, dreams of the carefree way of living just as he sees artists and movie characters have.

The teacher’s pay is barely enough to get by on. McCourt needs to borrow money in order to visit Ireland when he is in his late twenties. Every summer, he takes a job at the docks to make extra money. This time, he learns his late friend Paddy Arthur McGovern committed suicide on the train tracks. His coworker, who broke the news, blames the drinking as well as the country driving people crazy.

During his two-week visit in Limerick, he notices “more cars, fewer snotty noses and scabby knees, no barefoot children and no women in shawls” (*Tis*, page 253). His brother Malachy visited some time ago and people point out Malachy’s acting career and his beautiful wife. People are surprised to find out Frank works as a teacher, considering he wanted to become a writer. While returning to New York, McCourt is not sure where he belongs anymore.

Malachy pays for his mother’s and Alphie’s visit to New York for Christmas of 1959. For the first time in ten years, the mother is together with her four sons. The visit is rather tense, with Angela criticizing McCourt’s ill-looking eyes, Malachy and Linda’s usage of tea bags, Frank and

Alberta's dinner, and none of her sons offering her and Alphonse a place to stay overnight. She does enjoy Malachy's well-known parties and being introduced as his mother.

Michael married Donna from California and Angela was displeased with the Protestant minister who wedded them, showing her protest by arriving late and seeming indifferent. She finds her own apartment and reminisces about her former life in New York, her dead children, and pubs her husband would spend all his wages in. McCourt notes she must have had nightmares in that apartment.

McCourt got married to Alberta in 1961 in the Municipal Building in Manhattan. Their wedding day was filled with laughter, drinking, but also tension. Their best man, Brian McPhillips, dropped their wedding cake. Alberta and Brian's wife, Joyce, were both angry at the men for drinking so much during the reception. After cutting the cake, there is to be another round of drinks, so Alberta throws her wedding ring out the window. The guests spent hours searching for it, as it was Alberta's grandmother's wedding ring. Frank's wedding night ends with him and his friend Jim watching the television after the women drove off.

Malachy and his wife, Linda, separate. Their father decides to visit them, claiming he is a new man, but still manages to arrive in New York drunk. He and Malachy go to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, but he refuses to acknowledge his alcoholism. On his last day in New York, McCourt agrees to have a few beers with him, which is the last straw for their mother, and she is happy to send him back to Ireland.

At school, McCourt has trouble making his pupils read. He has the last forty-eight cents to spend, so he entices the students with the novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, saying they would like it, but they would need to pay for it. He lives off the students' money and pays for the books when he gets paid. The book purchase gets him in trouble, so the author they move to is Shakespeare. First annoyed, the students are thrilled to find famous lines in the books and enjoy reading and reenacting them.

McCourt's new haven is the Lion's Head bar, where book jackets are displayed on the walls and he dreams of one of them being his. His mother, Angela, moves closer to Malachy, who married a woman named Diana and had sons Conor and Cormac. Their brother Alphonse and his wife Lynn have a daughter Allison. However, their mother barely visits them and when she does, the atmosphere is tense. Angela is discontented with everything. McCourt remembers his mother's story about how she bought groceries for a homeless woman and let her stay for the night. She would help people selflessly back in Limerick and McCourt asks himself why he cannot be the same way to her now.

McCourt teaches at New York Technical College in Brooklyn, where he accepts a class of "paraprofessionals", which is filled with mostly African American women aged from early twenties to late fifties. He asks them to write about their mothers, and questions about his mother come flooding in. The women praise his mother for the hardships she has endured.

His first daughter, Margaret Ann, is born in 1971. McCourt and Alberta buy a house for fifty thousand dollars, eight of which they inherited from their old neighbor whom McCourt sometimes visited to listen to intriguing stories.

In 1972, McCourt starts teaching at Stuyvesant High School. For some time, he maintains the know-it-all image of a strict teacher. However, his McKee history catches up to him and the students find out he never went to a High School himself, which forces him to rebuild his strict and competent reputation once more.

War is raging in Vietnam and the students demand they learn about the events in the world, to which McCourt replies there is always something happening in the world. He praises the women from his class at the New York Technical College for putting education above their hardships. Around this time, he realizes he has to “begin enjoying the act of teaching and the only way I could do that was to start over, teach what I loved and to hell with the curriculum” (*Tis*, page 308).

McCourt wishes for Maggie to see Ireland, so they stay with his uncle in Belfast and spend some time in Dublin along with Frank’s mother Angela. Frank’s father does not acknowledge Frank’s presence. When they say goodbye, they only shake hands and McCourt remembers the only act of affection he had ever received from him—the forehead kiss from when he was in a hospital with typhoid fever. His mother senses he does not feel like returning to New York. She is flirted with to the point of considering moving to Kerry with the farmer gentleman. However, they all return to New York and Angela’s health gradually worsens. The personality differences between Frank and Alberta become prominent so he leaves for good a week before Maggie’s eighth birthday.

He gets to teach a class on creative writing, drawing inspiration from cartoons. One of the major works his students do is writing their own children’s stories, illustrating and binding the book. Their critics are elementary school children and McCourt shows compassion for this class in various ways, like understanding the need to plagiarize from one of the students whose parents were going through a divorce. The educators doubt his methods, saying he “does not prepare our children for college and the demands of society” (*Tis*, page 322).

Angela is put into hospital where Frank visits her and becomes tearful at the sight of her. She cannot taste lemonade, feel her legs, and complains that her son brought her the wrong kind of razor. Frank does not stay for the night since his daughter Maggie sings with the choir the next day.

When Malachy calls at three in the morning he doesn’t have to say the words. All I can do is make a cup of tea the way Mam did at unusual times and sit up in the bed in a dark darker than darkness knowing by now they’ve moved her to a colder place, that gray fleshly body that carried seven of us into the world. I sip my hot tea for the comfort because there are feelings I didn’t expect. I thought I’d know the grief of the grown man,

the fine high mourning, the elegiac sense to suit the occasion. I didn't know I'd feel like a child cheated.

I'm sitting up in my bed with my knees pulled to my chest and there are tears that won't come to my eyes but beat instead like a small sea around my heart.

For once, Mam, my bladder is not near my eye and why isn't it? (*'Tis*, page 326)

Angela McCourt dies aged 73. Her death is surrounded by black humor, for instance a remark that her body could be put in a hefty garbage bag and left for collection. The family also considers cremating her because she wanted to be buried in Limerick and her whole body would be too expensive to transport. During the viewing, the sons and their families sang songs Angela both loved and hated—to confirm that she really did die.

We kiss her and I place on her breast a shilling I had borrowed from her long ago and when we walk the long corridor to the elevator I look back at her in the coffin, my gray mother in a cheap gray coffin, the color of beggary. (*'Tis*, page 329)

In January 1985 my brother Alphie called to say there was sad news from our cousin in Belfast, that our father, Malachy McCourt, had died early that morning at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

I don't know why Alphie used the word sad. (*'Tis*, page 330)

Despite being unsure why, Frank flies to Belfast to attend his father's funeral. The man's black suit and a white bowtie make him look like a seagull and Frank has to contain his laughter. Still, when he is there by himself, he remembers the way his father's lifestyle affected the sons and their mother. They buried him on a hill overlooking Belfast accompanied by distant gunshots—the Irish Republican Army had just lost three men and Malachy McCourt would have the “escort of his dreams” (*'Tis*, page 332).

The same year, they brought Angela's ashes to the graveyard at Mungret Abbey outside Limerick City. The family took turns sprinkling the ashes over the graves of Sheehans, Guilfoyles, and Griffins, unsatisfied with only saying a Hail Mary for the mother of seven who deserved a proper requiem; the mother who “was a grand dancer at the Wembley Hall and known to one and all for the way she sang a good song, oh, if she could only catch her breath” (*'Tis*, page 332).

3.4 *Teacher Man*

3.4.1 *Teacher Man*: Introduction

“Our children don’t need testing, they need loving. And that was Frank’s idea. Love them. Love what you’re talking about, love the words.”¹⁵ — Malachy McCourt, Frank’s younger brother

In *A Hell of a Second Act* interview included in the print, McCourt confirms he is finished with “Frank McCourt memoir stuff” (*Teacher Man, P.S.*, page 6). *Teacher Man* was allegedly much harder to write. He attributes it to the pressure of being a bestselling author as well as having to choose from a myriad of teaching experiences.

Both in the interview and in the book, McCourt confirms he was not ready to teach, hence why the first part of the book is titled “It’s a Long Road to Pedagogy”. Throughout the book, he admits multiple times that teaching was a learning process.

His writing style is rather natural. In the interview section, he explains this idea was opened to him by the writers P.G. Wodehouse, Charles Dickens, and Mark Twain. Throughout the book, on several occasions, the writing gets notably more profound and flowery, showcasing the writing ability of McCourt from his seventies.

However, since he is talking from his elderly perspective, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate whether he speaks from his young adult view or from the standpoint of a man in his seventies.

He compiles stories from all over his life. For instance, he returns to his late twenties, telling a story of a brave boy who resisted laughing at a schoolmaster’s joke alongside his classmates, which reminds him of a much earlier time when he got into trouble for his American accent in Limerick but could not stand up for himself. He expands on the latter story too; in this case, he writes about the fights he would get into and the trouble which would follow back home if he got his only shirt stained with blood.

Unlike in the previous memoirs, which were mostly written from the present perspective, he uses both past simple and present simple tense. The memories usually start in the past tense and rather seamlessly the tense changes into the present simple, which helps to make the presented image more immersive.

Augie was a nuisance in class, talking back, bothering the girls. I called his mother. Next day the door is thrown open and a man in a black T-shirt with the muscles of a weightlifter yells, Hey, Augie, come ‘ere. (*Teacher Man*, page 91)

¹⁵ McCourt, Malachy. “A Brother Remembers Frank McCourt.” *Big Think*, 30 Sept. 2021, bigthink.com/videos/a-brother-remembers-frank-mccourt.

James S. Rogers, the author of the article “‘Tis”, *Meaning Maybe: The Uncertain Last Words of Angela’s Ashes* points out the convenience of some of the names of the people in the memoirs; for instance, Frieda, whom McCourt slept with after he arrived in America, whose name could stand for freedom. Another case may be found in the controversial student Vivian who showed support for abortions (*Teacher Man*, page 118). The relatability to the situations of some names could be linked to the disclaimer at the beginning of *Teacher Man*, “The names and details concerning some individuals in *Teacher Man* have been changed”.

From the previous memoirs, it was clear that Americans often ignored death. However, with the children, McCourt was not afraid of touching upon the topic—at least with his class in Seward Park. One of his Chinese students, Nancy Chu, brought up Li Po, a Chinese poet, who drowned in an attempt to embrace the moon. Nancy’s mother, who allegedly loved Li Po, wished to die like that.

When the bell rings they don’t jump from their seats. They don’t rush and scramble. They take their things and file out quietly and I’m sure they have moon and lake images in their heads. (*Teacher Man*, page 135)

Unlike in the previous memoirs, McCourt sometimes comments on his memories. Generally, the writing is often retrospective, and the exact date is not always given. McCourt often shows self-pity in this memoir. In the previous two works, he presented his life simply as it was without further comments.

There should be a medal for people who survive miserable childhoods and become teachers, and I should be first in line for the medal and whatever bars might be appended for ensuing miseries. (*Teacher Man*, page 1)

They didn’t have to worry about the dissertation that was killing me. How and why did I ever get into this? Jesus! I could be in New York, grateful for my lot, teaching my five classes a day, going home, having a beer, going to a movie, reading a book, cooing to the wife and so to bed.

Oh, but no. Little snotty-nosed Frankie from the lanes of Limerick tried to rise above his station, climb the social ladder, mingle with a better class of people, the quality of Trinity College. (*Teacher Man*, page 176)

His views are sometimes contradictory and change throughout his life. He both despises and wishes for an office job. Usually, he wants to teach but other times he wishes to “do something adult and significant, go to meetings, dictate to my secretary, sit with glamorous people at long mahogany tables” (*Teacher Man*, page 184).

Themes and stories tend to be repetitive. For instance, McCourt writes out the duties which accompany the teaching job multiple times across the memoir. Some events were previously mentioned in *Angela’s Ashes* or ‘Tis, but most of the memories are original or further gone into.

Chapter 13 recollects the joyful lessons during which McCourt used cookbooks and instruments to recite recipes accompanied by music. After receiving some critique, he vents his frustration about the way proper teaching should look and brings himself down through conventional pedagogy, imagining his colleagues criticizing his lessons and questioning his teaching abilities.

Rarely confrontational with pupils even when their behavior disturbs the classroom routine, his own performance as a teacher may be characterized as attempts to simply maintain their attention. In the majority of his early years as a teacher in the rougher schools, he learned that his pupils simply did not want to attend English class. Initially, he keeps their attention with a modicum of success by simply narrating his childhood of poverty in Ireland, or occasionally describing some of the tough jobs on the Hudson docks he held before acquiring higher education. Over time, he describes gaining confidence and turning his pedagogical incompetence into remarkably innovative teaching approaches.¹⁶

It is clear from both the stories and McCourt's own words captured during interviews that he managed to find his way toward teaching. In order to do so, he had to stop taking parents' opinions into consideration, neglect the curriculum, and focus purely on his students.

¹⁶ Koy, Christopher E. Review of *Teacher Man*. Frank McCourt. New York, Harper Perennial, 2005. ATECR Newsletter. *Journal of English Language Teaching*. 18:2 (Autumn, 2007): p. 77

3.4.2 *Teacher Man*: Summary

The third and final memoir is opened with McCourt's accusations of his childhood, from which all his troubles stemmed: his own lack of self-esteem, self-pity tendencies, and general retardation in the development of his social skills. He claims the fact that he became a teacher and survived it all is something worthy of a medal. If he were to lay blame, he lays it in the spirit of forgiveness, forgiving all greater forces above him, among which were people such as Pope Pius XII, King George VI, the bishop of Limerick, or even Eamonn De Valera, the dominating Irish politician during his entire childhood.

Mr. De Valera was a half-Spanish Gaelic fanatic (Spanish onion in an Irish stew) who directed teachers all over Ireland to beat the native tongue into us and natural curiosity out of us. He caused us hours of misery. He was aloof and indifferent to the black and blue welts raised by schoolmaster sticks on various parts of our young bodies. (*Teacher Man*, pages 1-2)

Frank McCourt shared one important aspect with De Valera: both were born in New York City in deep poverty and moved as a small child back to Ireland but were American citizens by reason of birth. McCourt quotes F. Scott Fitzgerald, who claimed there are no second acts for the people in America. McCourt says he was wrong in his case, reminding the reader he spent most of his life teaching and being visible to his students only. The success of *Angela's Ashes*, which he mainly wrote to document the McCourt history, took him aback.

I hoped it might sell a few hundred copies and I might be invited to have discussions with book clubs. Instead it jumped onto the best-seller list and was translated into thirty languages and I was dazzled. The book was my second act. (*Teacher Man*, page 2)

Angela's Ashes was published in 1996 when McCourt was sixty-six; *'Tis* was released three years later. Just like with most of the accomplishments in his life, he was a late bloomer in the world of books.

So, what took you so long?

I was teaching, that's what took me so long. Not in college or university, where you have all the time in the world for writing and other diversions, but in four New York City public high schools. (*Teacher Man*, page 3)

McCourt talks about the tediousness of the teaching job and his lack of inclination to "fashion deathless prose" (*Teacher Man*, page 3) after five high school classes a day, five days a week. During his "second act", he gets to experience the life of a "media darling" and prides himself on meeting the first President Bush, President Clinton, the Pope—whose ring he kissed—or Sarah, Duchess of York, who interviewed him. She called him her "first Pulitzer Prize winner", to which he responded that she was "his first duchess" and daringly asked the cameraman whether he got her reaction on camera. "I traveled the world being Irish, being a teacher, an authority on

misery of all kinds, a beacon of hope to senior citizens everywhere who always wanted to tell their stories” (*Teacher Man*, page 4).

After writing *Tis*, he felt he did not give his teaching career enough attention and pointed out how underrated the profession is. He ridicules how an English teacher is often praised for “her” inspiration, yet “fade into gray shadows to eke out her days on a penny-pinching pension, dreaming of the one child she might have reached. Dream on, teacher. You will not be celebrated” (*Teacher Man*, pages 4-5).

You think you’ll get into the classroom, stand a moment, wait for silence, watch while they open notebooks and click pens, tell them your name, write it on the board, proceed to teach.

...

You can’t wait to get to the literature. You’ll have lively discussions about poems, plays, essays, novels, short stories. The hands of one hundred and seventy students will quiver in the air and they’ll call out, Mr. McCourt, me, me, I wanna say something.

...

You’ll be nominated for awards: Teacher of the Year, Teacher of the Century. You’ll be invited to Washington. Eisenhower will shake your hand. Newspapers will ask you, a mere teacher, for your opinion on education. This will be big news: A teacher asked for his opinion on education. Wow. You’ll be on television.

Television.

Imagine: A teacher on television. (*Teacher Man*, page 5)

He writes about the movie adaptation of *Angela’s Ashes*, which came out in 1999, and other movies about his own life where he starred and praises himself for resisting the “siren call of Hollywood” (*Teacher Man*, page 7), which brought many established and aspired female stars’ lives to hollowness; subtly emphasizing the appreciative gestures of the parents of his one hundred and seventy students.

In the first chapter, McCourt confirms convincingly that he was not ready to teach. He writes he was almost fired for eating the sandwich of one of the boys and mentioning the possibility of friendship with a sheep. Apart from that, there was allegedly nothing remarkable about his thirty years of teaching in the New York City public school system. In fact, he often doubted whether he should keep on teaching.

He complains Eisenhower’s America may be prosperous, but the prosperity does not trickle down to schools, since he has to request or buy red pens himself, even though they are referred to as a “teacher’s most powerful weapon” (*Teacher Man*, page 12); a weapon against the difficult American teenagers.

It is the Eisenhower era and newspapers report the great unhappiness of American adolescents. There are the “Lost Children of the Lost Children of the Lost Generation.” Movies, musicals, books tell us of their unhappiness: *Rebel Without a Cause*, *The Blackboard Jungle*, *West Side Story*, *The Catcher in the Rye*. They make

despairing speeches. Life is meaningless. All adults are phonies. What's the use of living at all? (*Teacher Man*, page 13)

McCourt shares that their desire to fight is not met positively by their fathers who had fought in World War II: "Fathers say, Oh, shaddap. Don't bodder me. I got a pounda sharpnel up my ass an' I don't have time for you bitchin' an' moanin' wid your belly full an' your closet stuffed with clothes." (*Teacher Man*, page 13). Fights fueled by teenage unhappiness break out within the city, and the blame is laid on teachers.

Italians, Blacks, Irish, Puerto Ricans attack with knives, chains, baseball bats in Central Park and Prospect Park and stain the grass with their blood, which is always red no matter where it came from. Then if there's a killing there's a public outrage and accusations that if the schools and teachers were doing their jobs these terrible things wouldn't happen. (*Teacher Man*, page 13)

McCourt returns to his first teaching experience, which he already mentioned in *Tis*; his first sentence as a teacher: "Stop throwing sandwiches." He explains that he failed to capture the students' attention until one of the students threw his sandwich and McCourt told him not to do so, which caused ridicule from the students who said there was no point in telling him since the sandwich was already thrown. As a response, McCourt just picked up the sandwich and ate it.

And you called yourself a teacher?

I didn't call myself anything. I was more than a teacher. And less. In the high school classroom you are a drill sergeant, a rabbi, a shoulder to cry on, a disciplinarian, a singer, a low-level scholar, a clerk, a referee, a clown, a counselor, a dress-code enforcer, a conductor, an apologist, a philosopher, a collaborator, a tap dancer, a politician, a therapist, a fool, a traffic cop, a priest, a mother-father-brother-sister-uncle-aunt, a bookkeeper, a critic, a psychologist, the last straw. (*Teacher Man*, page 19)

The next day, students try to divert the lesson by asking him about Ireland, one of which is a question whether he went out with girls in Ireland, to which he responded: "No, dammit. Sheep. We went out with sheep. What do you think we went out with?" (*Teacher Man*, page 22) He instantly and rightfully regretted the remark, which accordingly got him into trouble. Still, he struggled with brushing off students' questions as it would remind him of his school in Limerick "where the lesson was king and we were nothing" (*Teacher Man*, page 24).

Compared to that, McCourt's priority was to approach the students rather than forcefully go through with a lesson plan. He rarely prepared a structured lesson plan; instead, he liked to challenge the image of classes. For instance, during one of his classes he simply told the students to push the chairs to the side, sit on the floor, and doze off.

McCourt reiterates the reasons for his "hangdog look" which could be seen on him during his early teaching days—the fact that he moved to Ireland, three of his siblings had died, his father left them when he was eleven, their mother had to beg for everything and resisted putting her children into an orphanage. Her sons left school aged fourteen and dreamed of going to America,

sailing away one by one until their mother finally joined them for a happy-ever-after, which she never received. In America, McCourt sums up his laboring jobs, joining the US Army, and his journey to becoming a teacher. He criticizes his professors, writing that they did not know how to teach the art of teaching. He himself had issues following the typical teaching patterns.

Despite being described as charismatic later in his life, he calls himself out as lacking charisma in his younger years. His peculiar Irish accent was also an obstacle in his attempt of building an authoritarian persona. In the end, he was forced to search for unconventional ways to maintain the students' attention. Oftentimes, he used his storytelling skills to do so.

I argue with myself, You're telling stories and you're supposed to be teaching.
I am teaching. Storytelling is teaching.
Storytelling is a waste of time.
I can't help it. I'm not good at lecturing.
You're a fraud. You're cheating our children. (*Teacher Man*, page 26)

According to one of the stories from Ireland, one day, the schoolmaster joked that McCourt looked like something the cat brought in, which earned laughs from the whole class, except for one boy: Billy Campbell. Billy's father was from Dublin and he understood the bullying McCourt underwent because of his American accent and then his father's Northern Irish origin. McCourt praises Billy while telling the story but his students propose he should give some credit to himself. Telling stories actually helps McCourt make discoveries about himself.

He tells stories from other people's perspectives, too; like one from his mother's perspective, which she told a neighbor. Allegedly, Angela was once asked whether she would sell her son Malachy "with his golden blond hair, his pink cheeks, his lovely little pearly white teeth" (*Teacher Man*, page 29), but Angela refused. When McCourt heard the story for the "hundredth time", he responded she should have sold Malachy since "there would have been more food for the rest of us" (*Teacher Man*, page 29), to which she sarcastically replied she had offered Frank for sale, but the lady was not interested. The students protest, saying "People shouldn't offer to sell their children. You ain't so ugly" (*Teacher Man*, page 29).

According to the schoolmaster, Frank was a "very bad boy" as a six-year-old. All of the boys were forced to say "*mea culpa*", which he later found meant "I am guilty", not "I am sorry" in Latin, as he had assumed. The boys' heads were allegedly filled with "American trash from the Lyric Cinema" (*Teacher Man*, page 29) and baptismal water was wasted on them; even looking at their "darting little eyes was proof of our wickedness" (*Teacher Man*, page 29). The schoolmaster would make them confess to the seven deadly sins; their favorite being gluttony, since Paddy Clohessy would describe dreamy meals.

It is interesting to note very few of McCourt's teachers were sympathetic. Even though his colleagues' behavior was not as traumatizing as the teachers in Limerick, it was still obvious most of the high school teachers were rather oblivious and constantly unhappy with their pupils.

McCourt himself does not comment on this fact, even though from the outside, his stance, and the care he held for his pupils was praised by many, including his brother Malachy.

When you get into the habit of examining your conscience it's hard to stop, especially when you're an Irish Catholic boy. If you do bad things you look into your soul, and there are the sins, festering. Everything is either a sin or not a sin and that's an idea you might carry in your head for the rest of your life.

...
If I could travel to my twenty-seventh year, my first teaching year, I'd take me out for a steak, a baked potato, a pint of stout. I'd give myself a good talking to. For Christ's sake, kid, straighten up. Throw back those miserable bony shoulders. Stop mumbling. Speak up. Stop putting yourself down. (*Teacher Man*, pages 31-32)

He would prepare himself for what teaching entails: mountains of papers to correct, reading teenage stories, never finding out what it does to one's mind. Nevertheless, the teenagers would keep him fresh, compelling him to live with the mind of an adolescent forever.

Before leaving for America, his mother haggled new clothes and a suitcase for him, which was unusual for her and the women from the Limerick back lanes. That day, he also bought his first book, *The Works of William Shakespeare: Gathered into One Volume*. When he was thirteen/fourteen, he listened to Shakespeare's plays on Mrs. Purcell's radio and tried to learn more by reading Shakespeare in a bookshop. However, he was asked to leave and since then, he "wondered why people won't stop bothering people" (*Teacher Man*, page 36).

The book was nineteen shillings, half a week's wages. I wish I could say I bought it because of my profound interest in Shakespeare. It wasn't that way at all. I had to have it because of a film I saw where an American soldier in England went around spouting Shakespeare and all the girls fell madly in love with him. Also, if you even hint that you read Shakespeare, people give you that look of respect. (*Teacher Man*, page 36)

Through this notion, we can see McCourt's main interest was to appear interesting rather than reading itself. Still, McCourt was once so moved by a Shakespeare play, he gave the actors a sixpence. Later, seeing them celebrate with whiskey, he regretted it, noting that their stories were false, unlike his suffering, which was real.

I never thought much of my life but I went on doling out bits and pieces of it, my father's drinking, days in Limerick slums when I dreamed of America, Catholicism, drab days in New York, and I was surprised that New York teenagers asked for more. (*Teacher Man*, page 38)

One of the takeaways crucial for beginner teachers was the ability to decide one's posture and placement, as well as identity and image and identify which "performance" worked best in the classroom setting. According to one of McCourt's professors, the first impression could determine the teacher's entire career. "And remember: teachers who sit or even stand behind their desks are essentially insecure and should try another line of work" (*Teacher Man*, page 40).

One of his fellow students, June Somers, once provocatively asked their professor how many high school classes he had taught, to which he answered he observed dozens. Unsatisfied with the answer, June leaves. McCourt later finds out June and the professor are dating. He is jealous, as he finds June attractive. To his surprise, June gives him her number and they go for a drink. The professor is away for a week and McCourt spends that week with June. She encourages him to present himself more confidently. Later, he finds out he was not the only one to be “played with” in this manner and imagines himself being more confident by refusing her conversational attempts.

During his interview for the New York teacher’s license, he had trouble analyzing the poem he was given to read and present to the examiners. When the examiners asked how he would present it in class and reinforce the knowledge, he suggested letting the students write a suicide note, which got him excused from the interview.

They were high school department heads or had other important jobs and I disliked them the way I disliked anyone with power over me, bosses, bishops, college professors, tax examiners, foremen in general. Even so, I wondered why people like the examiners are so impolite they make you feel unworthy. I thought if I were sitting in their place I’d try to help candidates overcome their nervousness. (*Teacher Man*, page 51)

During his teaching test, he was to give a class on war poems. He tried his best to attain the best result; gaining the students’ attention with a story about his aunt’s husband, “who was gassed in World War I and when he came home the only job he could find was shoveling coal” (*Teacher Man*, page 52). He states the aim of the class, tries to motivate and excite the students, and asks pivotal questions, but fails to present to the examiners a lesson summary and expects to fail. The chairman runs after him, saying he can expect to pass since he actually knew Sassoon and Owen, whose poems they read in class, which was rare.

When he called about the teaching job, he was told the chairman who offered him the job had passed away. His search for a teaching job elsewhere proved fruitless for a long time due to his Irish accent.

Students ask whether he ever had a “real job”, which prompts the telling of several stories from his workdays at the docks. The work was rough but one’s mind could rest. The people there would constantly joke about one another; except for when the joke included one’s mother, which would always result in a fight. Once McCourt’s superordinate suddenly died, he was given a decision; to take over his position or to teach. His conscience eventually told him to stop hiding and finally face the students.

In the next chapter, McCourt summarizes his teaching experience; he taught in five high schools and one college, which might be around twelve thousand students over the course of thirty-three thousand hour classes.

They straggle in from auto mechanics shop, the real world, where they break down and reassemble everything from Volkswagens to Cadillacs, and here's this teacher going on about the parts of a paragraph. Jesus, man. You don't need paragraphs in an auto shop. (*Teacher Man*, page 68)

The students often challenge the teacher. They do not care about his problems, especially since he is one of theirs. "They know it's a forty-minute showdown, you versus them, thirty-four New York teenager, the future mechanics and craftsmen of America" (*Teacher Man*, page 68). It is curious to note the experience McCourt describes is still relatable to present-day teachers across the world.

McCourt praises the rainy days. Allegedly, everything feels calmer; there are no complaints and no rush. Students also ask more personal questions, which reflect their own thoughts, like "Mr. McCourt, you ever in love?" (*Teacher Man*, page 69).

A boy raises his hand. He says, Why can't teachers treat us like human beings?
You don't know. Well, man, if you don't know, tell them, I don't know. Tell them about school in Ireland. You went to school in a state of terror. You hated it and dreamed of being fourteen and getting a job. (*Teacher Man*, page 69)

McCourt says it should rain every day. During spring, everyone is already looking forward to summer, and even pigeons copulating on the windowsill are "more seductive than the best lesson by the greatest teacher in the world" (*Teacher Man*, page 69).

On days like this there is background music with hints of zephyr, breast, biceps, smile and summer.

And if my students ever wrote like that I'd send them to Simplicity School. (*Teacher Man*, pages 69-70)

McCourt was accordingly unprepared for the Open School Day and Open School Night. Norma, his student monitor, helped him organize it. After receiving compliments from the parents who said she should become a teacher, she replied she would rather work in a travel agency. She said she did not want to become a mother after she was asked whether she would want to settle down. This brought tension into the room and a number of parents stood up and insulted both McCourt and Norma. One of the mothers said she would break her face if she was her daughter. McCourt's heart allegedly sank as Norma apologized, saying it was "a dumb thing to say" and "it was not Mr. McCourt's fault" (*Teacher Man*, page 73). Despite not stating it openly, McCourt showed another of his progressive views by siding with Norma. At that time, it was expected of women to want to marry, settle down and have children. McCourt remarked that there was no book by a professor of education that would help in this situation. On his second Open School Day, he was called a fraud for telling stories instead of teaching.

I wanted to be a good teacher. I wanted the approval that would come when I sent my students home stuffed with spelling and vocabulary and all that would lead to a better life but, *mea culpa*, I didn't know how. (*Teacher Man*, page 74)

McCourt ended up masking teaching grammar behind telling stories. "John went to the store" was an ineffective sentence when he asked the students to find the subject. However, it sparked conversation when he asked: "Why did John go to the store?" The students came up with various stories on the topic and on top of that, McCourt could teach sentences like "John store to the went" were "gibberish"—a word he taught the students and felt content knowing they would remember him every time they used that word.

The students were most creative with their forged excuses. McCourt stored them in his drawer and wrote they could be turned into "an anthology of Great American Excuses or Great American Lies" (*Teacher Man*, page 85). Instead of berating them, he turned the notes into a subject of study.

They're smiling. They know. We're in this together. Sinners.

Some of the notes on that sheet were written by people in this class. You know who you are. You used your imagination and didn't settle for the old alarm-clock story. You'll be making excuses the rest of your life and you'll want them to be believable and original. (*Teacher Man*, page 86)

They produced a rhapsody of excuses, ranging from a family epidemic of diarrhea to a sixteen-wheeler truck crashing into a house, to a severe case of food poisoning blamed on the McKee High School cafeteria.

They said, More, more. Could we do more?

I was taken aback. How do I handle this enthusiasm? (*Teacher Man*, page 87)

Their homework was to write an excuse note from Adam to God or from Eve to God. The next day, the students brought a plethora of excuse notes on the given topics and more. McCourt asked them what historical figures could use a good excuse note; among the suggestions from McCourt were Hitler, Eva Braun, Judas, Attila the Hun, or Al Capone. The students suggested draft dodgers and other teachers from their school. During the class, the principal and the Staten Island Superintendent of schools, Mr. Martin Wolfson, arrived on inspection.

I've done something wrong again. The shit hit the fan and I don't know why. There will be a negative letter in my file. You do your best. You take the ball on the hop. You try something that has never ever been done in the whole history of the world. You have your kids hopping with enthusiasm over the excuse notes. But now comes the reckoning, teacher man. Down the hallway to the principal's office. (*Teacher Man*, page 89)

To McCourt's surprise, the superintendent praises him, saying what he did in the class was "top-notch" and down-to-earth, claiming the writing of the students was college level and even though the writing of excuse notes for criminal people may seem unwise, "it's what lawyers do" (*Teacher Man*, page 90). McCourt is so ecstatic he sings.

Next day, I tell the class I know a song they'll like, a tongue-twister of a song, and here it is:

O ro the rattlin' bog, the bog down in the valley O,
O ro the rattlin' bog, the bog down in the valley O,
And in that bog there was a tree, a rare tree, a rattlin' tree,
And the tree in the bog and the bog down in the valley O. (*Teacher Man*,
page 90)

McCourt praises the mood of the class, saying teachers should sing all of a sudden more often as one does not need an excuse for singing. The following chapter offers a complete juxtaposition to the mood in the previous one. An angry father once came into the classroom after McCourt complained about a student's behavior to the student's mother. The father picked up his son Augie, carried him over to the wall and banged him against it. McCourt was unsuccessful in trying to stop him. When the father left, unusual silence in the class revealed that McCourt betrayed the student by telling on him. Another problematic case was with students Sal and Louise, who fell out due to their nationalities being Irish and Italian.

I knew if I tried to talk to either one I would have fumbled and stammered. The best thing was to do nothing, which is all I was capable of anyway. Someday I'd comfort someone in the hall with the string arm around the shoulder, the soft word, the hug. (*Teacher Man*, page 95)

There was a student no one could handle: Kevin Dunne. They put him in McCourt's class and despite saying he did very little for him, Kevin showed appreciation for him in the form of writing "McCort ok" on a set of jars McCourt let him have. He was transferred to a special school for incorrigibles and then taken by the army. His mother came to McCourt to say he was missing in Vietnam and gave him a jar Kevin painted and decorated with his flaming red hair.

I talked to the teachers in the cafeteria about Kevin. They shook their heads. They said, Too bad. Some of these kids slip through the cracks but what the hell is the teacher supposed to do? We have huge classes, no time, and we're not psychologists. (*Teacher Man*, page 100)

McCourt married Alberta Small when he was thirty. Since they later divorced, their relationship is only scarcely mentioned in both *'Tis* and *Teacher Man*. Most of the memories he shares carry a negative connotation. Around that time, he started courses at Brooklyn College for the Master of Arts in English Literature. He wrote a thesis *Oliver St. John Gogarty: A Critical Study*, which he admits was not too critical, since McCourt admired him and hoped to grasp some of his talent while writing about him.

His first and favorite professor at Brooklyn College was Morton Irving Seiden, whose classes made McCourt feel sorry for all the people on subway trains who did not get to learn everything he did. He tried imitating Seiden's teaching style but it was not suitable for the high school children.

Only about half of the McKee High School students were able to pass the New York State English Regents examination. McCourt and other teachers tried to help their grades by adding points for text legibility, using paragraphs, but also simply showing up, or “having dead fathers”.

McCourt left McKee Vocational and Technical High School after eight years, in 1966. He became an adjunct lecturer at New York Community College, where his salary was half of what he earned at high schools, but at least the students were responsible adults. He taught two courses: Introduction to Literature and Basic Composition. One of his students, Freddie Bell, “an elegant young black man”, had a florid writing style and refused to simplify it for the sake of clarity.

His high school teacher told him the English language was a glorious organ. Why not take advantage of this tremendous instrument? Pull out all the stops, so to speak.

Because, Freddie, what you’re doing is false, forced and artificial.

That was the wrong thing to say, especially with thirty of his fellow students watching and listening. His face froze and I knew I had lost him. That would mean a hostile presence in the class the remainder of the term, a discomfiting prospect for me, still making my way in this adult-student world.

He struck back with language. His writing became more elaborate and tortured. His grades slipped from As to B minuses. (*Teacher Man*, page 116)

Freddie Bell did not give up on his motives, which was to not bore the teacher with the “same old words” (*Teacher Man*, page 117). In order to earn a better grade, he claimed it was hard enough to attend classes while working nights to sustain his education.

I don’t see what that has to do with your writing.

Also, it’s not easy when you’re black in this society.

Oh, Christ, Freddie. It’s not easy being anything in this society. All right. You want an A? You’ll get it. I don’t want to be accused of bigotry. (*Teacher Man*, page 117)

In another course, McCourt asks his students to write a research paper. They do not know what “topic” or “pros and cons” are. McCourt asks them where they stand on capital punishment. When they find out what it stands for, one of the students, Vivian from Haiti, says executions are wrong, but she supports abortion. When McCourt says she should write a research paper on it, she is surprised anyone would care about her opinion. Since McCourt also struggled with a low self-image, he likely saw himself in this statement.

That was something I should have known all along: the people in my classes, adults from eighteen to sixty-two, thought their opinions did not matter. Whatever ideas they had came from the avalanche of media in our world. No one had ever told them they had a right to think for themselves. (*Teacher Man*, page 119)

Despite his best efforts to “help them cast off their shackles, to lead them to the mountaintop, to breathe the air of freedom” (*Teacher Man*, page 120), the research papers turned out to be “an ecstasy of plagiarism” (*Teacher Man*, page 120). In the interview at the end of the

memoir, McCourt states that he was glad the technological advancements happened after he went into retirement, since he would have much bigger trouble gaining the students' attention if they had mobile phones. Undoubtedly, the plagiarizing situation was also milder in McCourt's teaching days.

Any further encouragements to dig into the subjects more were ignored, which made McCourt feel disappointed in himself for not being able to form a connection with these students. Soon after, his college career ended as people with Ph.D.s were applying for his position.

If I wanted to stay I'd need to show evidence I was pursuing a degree on the doctoral level. I told him I wasn't pursuing anything.

Sorry, said the chairman.

Oh, it's alright, I said, and went searching for another high school teaching job. (*Teacher Man*, page 121)

Alberta was not happy about him changing jobs again and pointed out the people around them were well settled, having children and planning out their lives. McCourt allegedly agreed with her but could not admit it, saying life was an adventure and maybe he was living in the wrong century, praising the plots of the Western movies.

I said that was the part of American history I loved. She said, Oh, Conestoga wagon, my ass, go get a job, and I snapped right back with a line from Dylan Thomas, A job is death without dignity. She said, You'll have dignity, but you won't have me. You could see there was little hope for the future of that marriage. (*Teacher Man*, page 122)

His next job at Fashion Industries High School lasted only one term. He encountered several issues with the head of the Academic Department and the students, one of which was hitting a student with a magazine that he refused to open. The student, Hector, was put in his class because his mother had an Irish name and he kept asking about the Irish. "Besides, he has gender problems . . . He thinks now you hate homosexuals" (*Teacher Man*, page 127). McCourt was told if he wanted to slap kids, he should go teach in a Catholic school. The sarcastic suggestion shows the Catholic schools were infamous for the abuse which occurred there.

McCourt's next teaching job was at Alberta's high school, Seward Park on the Lower East Side. Since the main building was overcrowded, he taught at an abandoned elementary school used by Seward Park by the East River. The teenagers there, who were of all sorts of nationalities, complained about having to "squeeze their growing bodies into baby furniture" (*Teacher Man*, page 129). The teenagers were from all sorts of backgrounds: Jewish, Chinese, Puerto Rican, Russian, and others. However, McCourt had no prior preparation for teaching English as a Second Language. "The bell rings and I'm hearing a Tower of Babel" (*Teacher Man*, page 129).

The main point of interest for students who learn English is to know swear words and grasp the American accent, because "kids want to be cool" (*Teacher Man*, page 129). The students

are surprised McCourt is not Jewish like the other teachers. When asked why he is not Jewish, he simply states he does not know.

They look surprised, even astonished, and the look travels the room. The look says, You hear that, Miguel? Teacher up there, he doesn't know.

...

A few years earlier I could have been one of them, part of the huddled masses. This is my immigrant comfort level. I know English, but I'm not so far removed from their confusions. Rock bottom in the social hierarchy. I could drop the teacher mask, walk down the aisle, sit with them and ask them about their families, what it was like in the old country, tell them about myself, my meandering days, how I hid for years behind the mask. (*Teacher Man*, page 130)

The students learn that when McCourt arrived in America, he was confused, even though he had the advantage of knowing English. Confusion was something they had in common. McCourt ended up telling stories about how he first taught English in his first job during lunch hour once a week: he taught the Puerto Ricans from the hotel's kitchen, which made him an extra two dollars and fifty cents per session. The kitchen workers asked him how come he knew English, even though he was not from England, which made McCourt explain the Irish history to them. He wondered if he should charge extra for the words he had to explain, but could not, as the workers showed him sympathy and told the stories of their countries being conquered in exchange.

They understood because they were conquered so much they didn't know who they were, didn't know if they were black or white or Indian or all three rolled into one and that's hard to explain to your kids because they want to be one thing. (*Teacher Man*, page 133)

Once McCourt ran out of words related to the kitchen, which the coworkers paid him to teach them, two workers dropped out of the "course". Still, they asked McCourt about English words outside the kitchen and McCourt provided translation free of charge, which angered the paying coworkers. After a fight among the Puerto Ricans, they told McCourt they "didn't care anymore, that I should take my dustpan and shove it up my ass" (*Teacher Man*, page 135). Big George, the chef of the kitchen, said McCourt was a good teacher and they all should come to the kitchen for a piece of peach pie. "But we never had the pie because Big George had a heart attack and collapsed on an open flame on the stove and they said you could smell his flesh burning" (*Teacher Man*, page 135).

In 1968, at Seward Park High School, McCourt had faced allegedly the hardest challenge of his whole teaching career. His class consisted of twenty-nine black girls and two Puerto Rican boys who wished to go see a movie. The fifteen-year-olds wreaked havoc on their way to the movie theater and in it, too. Still, McCourt wished to win them on his side, so he tolerated their behavior and bought the tickets for them.

Serena, a girl who showed superiority over her classmates, had to abruptly leave school when her mother was arrested. McCourt's relationship with the class turned for the better afterward and Serena even sent him a letter where she wrote she reads the bible to her grandmother and hopes to become a teacher. "There were fireworks in my head. It was New Year's Eve and the Fourth of July a hundred times over" (*Teacher Man*, page 146).

Returning to his tenth year of teaching, when he was thirty-eight years old, McCourt concludes he was doing his "dogged best" (*Teacher Man*, page 147). He still doubted whether he was capable enough since he was not a "tough, disciplined teacher, organized and focused, John Wayne of pedagogy, another Irish schoolmaster wielding stick, strap, cane" (*Teacher Man*, page 147). He appreciates the classes after which the students look at him approvingly, which is their way of saying the lesson was enjoyable.

There were rules from the officials who supervised the high schools in New York, like keeping their voices down, not misusing the lavatory pass, or not throwing things in class. Teachers were also expected to maintain discipline and prevent drug gangs from selling in schools.

According to McCourt, teachers learn alongside their students. However, what they gain is a sixth sense about everyone who enters a room; they notice the glances, the mood, "they can tell if this class is a pain-in-the-ass group or one they can work with. They see quiet kids who have to be drawn out and loudmouths who have to be shut up" (*Teacher Man*, page 149). McCourt admits he favors girls for their "variety, colors, games, drama" (*Teacher Man*, page 150). Toward indifferent boys, he considers acting ruthless.

I know I have to act. Andrew's head rests against the wall and he's giving me that little smile of contempt.

I don't like Andrew's tumbling red hair, the fine features. I don't like the arrogance of his delicacy. Sometimes when I've warmed up to a subject and the class is with me and I'm rolling along, delighted with myself, I look back at his cold stare and wonder if I should try to win him over or destroy him completely. (*Teacher Man*, page 150)

You can't talk like that. You'd be reported to the authorities. You know your role: if the little buggers piss you off from time to time, suffer, man, suffer. No one is forcing you to stay in this miserable underpaid profession and there's nothing to keep you from going through that door to the shimmering world of powerful men, beautiful women, cocktail parties uptown, satin sheets. (*Teacher Man*, page 152)

The problematic student in question, Andrew, told McCourt his mother knew him from college. Her name was June (née Somers) and she died of cancer the previous year. June was mentioned earlier in the memoir as Frank's classmate who started dating their professor. Frank and June began building a relationship but after finding out he was just one of June's partners, Frank decided to cut contact with her. June made Andrew promise she would not tell McCourt he was her son. Apparently, she was planning on calling McCourt but never got to it, assuming

McCourt would not want to talk to her anyway. “But I did want to talk to her. I wanted to talk to her forever” (*Teacher Man*, page 153).

McCourt’s wife Alberta suggested he try to get a Ph.D. and “rise in the world” (*Teacher Man*, page 157). McCourt was accepted for the doctorate program at New York University, but Alberta proposed whether he would rather study in London or Dublin. When asked whether she wanted to “get rid of him” (*Teacher Man*, page 158), she smiled.

The mention of Dublin’s Trinity College, which historically had been limited only to Protestant Irish students, prompted McCourt to share a story related to it. When he was young, he never stepped foot there despite wanting to because he was Catholic. He first went there when he returned to Dublin during his army days. During that evening, he drank a few beers in the company of a waitress named Mary he tried to drive away. Because of his uniform, he was an object of ridicule. He also felt embarrassed by Mary, who McCourt described as “fat, eyes buried in the folds of her face, and she had chins that hung and swung” (*Teacher Man*, page 160). When they stopped by a jewelry store and she mentioned the thought of getting married, McCourt ran away. The next day, he went to her to apologize, and they went out for a meal. McCourt then spent the night at her place, where they had sex after saying their prayers.

He attended Trinity College at the age of thirty-eight. When he and Alberta said their goodbyes, McCourt was unsure whether either of them really meant them. He traveled to Ireland on a ship and reminisced about his way to Ireland and the way he waved goodbye to New York when he was four. On the ship, drinking gave him enough courage to get close with a private nurse. He shared a cabin with a Protestant young man who invited him for a prayer. McCourt refused, finding excuses like not knowing any Protestant prayers and needing to shower. He was upset about the man having the need to try to convert him. After three days, he saw the nurse on the deck escorting an elderly man.

She passed on and I wondered if she wagged her arse deliberately to torment me.

Waggle on. I don’t care.

But I cared. I felt destroyed, cast aside. After her three days with me how could that nurse go off with that old man who was at least sixty? What about the times sitting up in bed drinking bottles of white wine? What about the time I scrubbed her back in the tub? (*Teacher Man*, page 166)

...

I stood at the rail, with the ship whooshing along, thinking about my life and what a poltroon I was. (That was one of my favorite words at the time and it was apt.) Poltroon. All I did from the day I arrived in New York to this day on the *Queen Elizabeth* was meander from one thing to another: emigrate, work at dead-end jobs, drink in Germany and New York, chase women, sleep through four years at New York University, drift from one teaching job to another, marry and wish I was single, have another drink, hit a cul-de-sac in teaching, sail for Ireland with the hope that life would behave itself. (*Teacher Man*, page 167)

He remembers the time Alberta made him see a psychotherapist. He found the weeks spent there worthless and felt worse than ever. In group sessions, which would allegedly help with his social skills, McCourt noted the shocking secrets said there would normally be only heard during confessions. He stopped coming to the sessions after one man admitted to taking the communion wafers home to masturbate on them. In general, he never talked much and got mocked by the others for being silent but then telling their secrets to his friends in bars.

McCourt spent two years in Dublin but never became a part of any social circle. His first apartment in Dublin was at Seaview Terrace off Ailesbury Road, “where Anthony Trollope lived when he rode his horse around Ireland as a postal inspector and every morning wrote three thousand words” (*Teacher Man*, page 174). The dissertation topic he picked was *Irish-American Literary Relations, 1889-1911*.

While researching for his dissertation, he became more interested in the historical aspect of the Irish-American relationships. However, he was not allowed to change the topic. During the two years, he spent his time drinking and walking around Dublin, hoping to “find the door into the city”. In New York, the door was schools, bars, and friendship, but he never felt welcome in Dublin. He committed another act of adultery with an unnamed woman who is not mentioned outside of the two sentences dedicated to her, “I met a woman, a Protestant, and we went to bed. She fell in love with me and I didn’t know why” (*Teacher Man*, page 177).

When he returned to New York in January 1971 as a failed doctoral candidate, Alberta was pregnant with a child they had conceived the previous summer. While she was on maternity leave, McCourt took over her position as teacher back at Seward but was fired after a few months due to making fun of the principal.

“A failed everything, I looked for my place in the world” (*Teacher Man*, page 178). He became a substitute teacher with no name and no respect from the students. He eventually discouraged most of the students from attending his classes, among which were science classes or history.

They knew it was a silly question, but they were supervisors and had to ask, Where are the kids? Everyone in every school knew the rule: When you see a substitute teacher, run, baby, run. (*Teacher Man*, page 179).

The third part of the book is named “Coming Alive in Room 205”. A year after he returned from Dublin an old friend introduced him to Roger Goodman, head of the English Department at Stuyvesant High School, which was said to be the “Harvard of high schools” (*Teacher Man*, page 183). McCourt praised it for the amount of Nobel Prize winners who had studied there. He was first offered a substitute position which later became permanent thanks to the students liking him. McCourt first planned to teach there for only two years since his head was constantly filled with adolescent noises, worries, and dreams.

His general view on life changed when his daughter Maggie was born. He looked forward to spending time with her and enjoyed his time at Stuyvesant High School in classroom 205. Roger Goodman was supportive of McCourt's teaching style. The problem with his writing classes was how time-consuming it was; assigning an essay of three hundred and fifty words for his five classes meant over 43,750 words to read and correct, which would take at least two days to go through. He often encounters difficult topics—like abuse—which he consults with the guidance counselor. According to another teacher, “half of the kids are in therapy and the other half should join them” (*Teacher Man*, page 189).

In 1974, McCourt was asked to teach creative writing. Around that time, he had only published a few pieces in *The Village Voice*, *Newsday*, and a defunct magazine in Dublin. Instead of teaching, he said he “conducted a course” or “ran a class” since he was also learning alongside his students.

One of the stories greatly resembles the time McCourt attended university and was encouraged to explore his life's story through writing. The student linked with this memory is Ben Chang from a hardworking family of seven. McCourt frequently told his students about the unimaginable poverty outside of America and Ben Chang came to share a story of how his family moved from China and everyone in their family had to work hard to sustain themselves.

I told him the story of his family was impressive and moving and wouldn't it be a tribute to his mother if he were to write it and read it to the class?

Oh, no, he could never do that. Never. (*Teacher Man*, page 193)

Another student came to him regarding the stories of the poor. According to McCourt, she was “black, petite and stylish” (*Teacher Man*, page 192) and shared she would like to become a pediatrician or psychiatrist in order to get closer to the kids early on in their lives. No one from her neighborhood was apparently planning to go to college. In this quote, we can see the student watching her formal language and McCourt's encouraging attitude.

I see kids in my neighborhood afraid to show how smart they are and the next thing is they're acting stupid in vacant lots and burned-out buildings. You know there's a lotta, lot of, smart kids in poor neighborhoods.

Mr. McCourt, will you tell us one of those Irish stories tomorrow?

For you, Doctor Sylvia, I would recite an epic. (*Teacher Man*, page 194)

McCourt's classes on creative writing had hundreds of students signing in. It made McCourt question his teaching quality—in a positive light as well as negatively—and wondered whether he was not too easy on the students. Nonetheless, his classes were so sought after even one of the mothers offered to spend the weekend at a resort with him if he accepted her daughter in his class. Compared to his previous teaching experience, the students at Stuyvesant knew that he was just buying himself time when he was unsure about anything.

At Stuyvesant I decided to admit it when I didn't have answers. I just don't know, friends. No, I've never read the Venerable Bede. I'm hazy on Transcendentalism. John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins can be tough going. I'm weak on the Louisiana Purchase. I've glanced at Schopenhauer and fallen asleep over Kant . . . (*Teacher Man*, page 203)

One of the students offers McCourt to try marzipan, which prompts the students to bring all sorts of homemade food the next day. They bring it outside and learn about Jewish, Italian, Chinese, and Korean dishes. McCourt asks them to bring cookbooks to class the next day, not knowing what they will use them for yet, showing the reader how improvised his lessons could be. During the lesson, they end up reading recipes out loud and learning new vocabulary. One student compares it to reading poetry and another student accompanies the reading with flute music. The class is loud and everyone is enjoying themselves. However, McCourt is criticized for not preparing them for college, which makes him question the proper way of teaching again and he moves away from the noisy recipe reading.

They groan again when I announce I am going to recite my favorite poem. That pisses me off and I tell them, You are pissing me off. A shocked silence. Teacher using bad language. Never mind. Recite the poem. (*Teacher Man*, page 216)

The poem is a nursery rhyme about Bo Peep who leaves her lost sheep alone and they return safely. McCourt likes the poem because, in his view, it tells people to stop bothering other people.

Even in his opinion, if he were to visit his class on nursery rhyme singing as a superintendent, he would criticize the absence of a clear goal, notebooks, analysis, and purpose, and the way the students casually sat at their desks.

McCourt liked to "interrogate" his students, asking seemingly repetitive and pointless questions, digging for details about students' dinners and other various topics. He used this interrogation to get an image they could discuss. For instance, he interrogated one of the students to share what they had for dinner the previous night, who cooked, served the table, and cleaned up. After finding out it was his mother and sister doing all the work while he was in his room and his father watched the television, a heated discussion commenced.

There are three thousand kids in this school and that should add up to six thousand parents, but this is New York, where divorce is a major sport and kids have to sort out who's who and what's what and when will it happen. Three thousand kids could have ten thousand parents and stepparents who are certain their sons and daughters are the brightest of the bright. (*Teacher Man*, page 232)

One of the students, Bob Stein, often teased McCourt during classes with witty remarks. He was a student of a rabbi who disapproved of Bob's dream of becoming a farmer. The two met six years later and Bob asked, "Mr. McCourt, you never liked me, did you?" (*Teacher Man*, page 239), to which McCourt responded it was a joy to have him in his class.

Tell him, McCourt, tell him the truth. Tell him how he brightened your days, how you told your friends about him, what an original he was, how you admired his style, his good humor, his honesty, his courage, how you would have given your soul for a son like him. And tell him how beautiful he was and is in every way, how you loved him and love him now. Tell him.

I did, and he was speechless and I didn't give a tinker's damn what people thought on Lower Broadway when they saw us in a long warm embrace, the high school teacher and the large Jewish Future Farmer of America. (*Teacher Man*, page 240)

Towards the end of the memoir, McCourt tells more remarkable stories from his classroom. Ken was a Korean boy who hated his abusive father but looking back thanks to McCourt he learned to accept the strict personality of a hard-working immigrant. Phyllis told a story about how her family gathered to watch Neil Armstrong walk on the moon while her father lay dying in the next room. McCourt and the whole class comforted the crying student and she smiled as the class clapped and cheered. "I thought, This isn't earthshaking, this touch on the cheek, but I'll never forget it: Phyllis, her dead father, Armstrong on the moon" (*Teacher Man*, page 244).

While writing, students claim McCourt was lucky to have his "miserable childhood" to write about, saying their lives consist of easy living, vacations, marrying, divorcing, gaining weight, getting a heart attack, retiring, and dying. McCourt urges his students to ask their parents and grandparents to tell and record their tales. Some parents and grandparents were hesitant to share their stories at first, but family relationships allegedly rearrange once "Grandpa isn't taken for granted by sixteen-year-old Milton anymore" (*Teacher Man*, page 247).

During the evaluation, the serious students complain that the goals of the class are unclear and that they would much rather know what they are supposed to learn rather than self-evaluate what they had learned. He grades the students based on their attendance, participation, comments, ability to reflect, and simply the ability to sit there and dream.

Time's winged chariot is hurrying near followed closely by the Hound of Heaven. You're getting older, and aren't you a two-faced blathering mick, prodding and encouraging kids to write when you know your own writer dream is dying. (*Teacher Man*, page 254)

One of his comforts could be the possibility of one of his students winning the Pulitzer Prize and showing honor to him. "This will be your moment in the sun, your reward for thousands of lessons taught, millions of words read" (*Teacher Man*, page 254). Nevertheless, McCourt shows partial regret over his teaching years.

I don't want to see or hear them. I have squandered my best years in the company of squawking adolescents. In the time I've spent in classrooms I could have read thousands of books. I could have roamed the Forty-second Street Library, up one side and down the other. I wish the kids would disappear. I'm not in the mood. (*Teacher Man*, page 254)

The memoir's second-to-final chapter also includes advice to new teachers. According to McCourt, they are to find what they love about teaching and do it. They are one power unit against hundreds and should help themselves first before they help the children. When McCourt felt he had nothing more to give to his students, he retired, hoping to catch up on the thirty years during which he had very little time to read and write.

Just like the previous two memoirs, this book ends with dialogue: the first part closes the second-to-last chapter and McCourt's answer makes for the only content of the final chapter.

The bell rings and they sprinkle me with confetti. I am told to have a good life. I wish them the same. I walk, color speckled, along the hallway.

Someone calls, Hey, Mr. McCourt, you should write a book.

I'll try. (*Teacher Man*, pages 257-258)

4 Summary

McCourt's memoirs were among the works which gained popularity during the so-called "memoir boom" in the 1990s. Other contemporary memoirs included, for example, *Autobiography of a Face* (1994) by Lucy Grealy, *Liars' Club* (1995) by Mary Karr, or *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) by Susanna Kaysen.

Ranging in popularity, all of McCourt's memoirs have achieved recognition in some way. *Angela's Ashes* will remain the most valued one for its timeless composition and enticing plot dealing with tragical stories masterly alleviated by McCourt's wit. The naturalistic conveyance of the memoirs' events raised several questions regarding McCourt's frankness. McCourt focused primarily on showcasing the impression left on his person while remaining true to contextual accuracy, although the process of gathering context is something he intentionally left out of the memoirs' pages. The theme of *Angela's Ashes* has proven appealing to American readers who, besides wanting to affirm their country's greatness, seek some connection with their roots, as many Americans are of Irish descent. Regarding the legacy the memoirs have had on the city of Limerick, it is certain it altered the city's touristic sights. Unfortunately for the curious readers, many of the buildings they read about in the memoirs have been demolished or renovated beyond recognition. Limerick also opened a Frank McCourt Museum, although it closed its doors in 2019.¹⁷

'Tis has received comparatively less praise, although it too was listed for a short time on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Some claim the reduced popularity could have been because "memoirs of childhood inevitably evoke more enchantment than do memoirs of young manhood"¹⁸—although the quoted author generally praises *'Tis* for its other feats—but generally it could have been attributed to sequels rarely holding up to their predecessors. McCourt himself did not expect to follow up *'Tis* with another memoir, but after finishing his second memoir, he realized he offered very little space for his life's work—teaching.

If the author were not a Pulitzer Prize winner and international best-selling author of *Angela's Ashes* (1995), I doubt this autobiographical memoir about a teaching career spanning nearly thirty years in New York City public schools would gain much notice.¹⁹

Teacher Man provides the insight in the struggles of an underprepared teacher dealing with pubescent New York City students who are unwilling to learn. It shows the reality of teaching from a perspective of a man whose primary principle is to listen, offer the insight into the authentic

¹⁷ Casey, Jess. "'It Breaks My Heart' to Have to Close Frank McCourt Museum." *Irish Examiner*, 28 Sept. 2019, www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-30953561.html.

¹⁸ Schenk, Leslie. *'Tis*. *World Literature Today; Summer 2000; 74, 3; Literature Online*, p. 604

¹⁹ Koy, Christopher E. Review of *Teacher Man*. Frank McCourt. New York, Harper Perennial, 2005. ATECR Newsletter. *Journal of English Language Teaching*. 18:2 (Autumn, 2007): p. 75

reality of life both in the US and in Ireland, with the exception that his youthful experiences provide for remarkable stories which catch people's attention from the very first time he wrote an essay at New York University.

The important aspect of this memoir is its contribution to teachers and student teachers. McCourt lists a plethora of instances to which he could only respond with his best judgement unsubstantiated by any methodological classes or books. Their outcomes are on the readers to judge and potentially learn from.

McCourt's memoirs may not reflect the accurate process of remembering and simplifying one's life experiences, therefore idealizing the process of writing such a story. However, his work has garnished overwhelming interest in the Irish past suffering and heritage, provided another view in the world of an emigrant, and finally presented a style of teaching which mainly cultivates students' creativity and tends for their well-being, which is a stance praised and desired by countless teachers worldwide.

Had McCourt written the memoirs earlier in his life—which he had no interest in for the shame he linked with his past—the depressing self-pitying stories would likely gain little attention. Although writing from his elderly perspective, McCourt was able to evaluate his life's events, gather more insight and assess the importance of the stories he decided to tell.

In the end, the question should not be whether McCourt's memoirs provide a historically accurate look into his inner experiences, but, by McCourt's own words, his life's retelling should be enjoyed for the impression that is in it.

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6 Attachments

Attachment 1: The Bed

The Bed

When I was growing up in Limerick my mother had to go to the St. Vincent de Paul Society to see if she could get a bed for me and my brothers, Malachy, Michael, and Alphie who was barely walking. The man at the St. Vincent de Paul said he could give her a docket to go down to the Irishtown to a place that sold secondhand beds. My mother asked him couldn't we get a new bed because you never know what you're getting with an old one. There could be all kinds of diseases. The man said beggars can't be choosers and my mother shouldn't be so particular.

But she wouldn't give up. She asked if it was possible at least to find out if anyone had died in the bed. Surely that wasn't asking too much. She wouldn't want to be lying in her own bed at night thinking about her four small sons sleeping on a mattress that someone had died on, maybe someone that had a fever or consumption.

The St. Vincent de Paul man said, Missus, if you don't want this bed give me back the docket and I'll give it to someone that's not so particular.

Mam said, Ah, no, and she came home to get Alphie's pram so that we could carry the mattress, the spring and the bedstead. The man in the shop in the Irishtown wanted her to take a mattress with hair sticking out and spots and stains all over but my mother said she wouldn't let a cow sleep on a bed like that, didn't the man have another mattress over there in the corner? The man grumbled and said, All right, all right. Bejesus, the charity cases is gettin' very particular these days, and he stayed behind his counter watching us drag the mattress outside.

We had to push the pram up and down the streets of Limerick three times for the mattress and the different parts of the iron bedstead, the head, the end, the supports and the spring. My mother said she was ashamed of her life and wished she could do this at night. The man said he was sorry for her troubles but he closed at six sharp and wouldn't stay open if the Holy Family came for a bed. It was hard pushing the pram because it had one bockety wheel that wanted to go its own way and it was harder still with Alphie buried under the mattress screaming for his mother.

My father was there to drag the mattress upstairs and he helped us put the spring and the bedstead together. Of course he wouldn't help us push the pram two miles from the Irishtown because he'd be ashamed of the spectacle. He was from the North of Ireland and they must have a different way of bringing home the bed.

We had old overcoats to put on the bed because the St. Vincent de Paul Society wouldn't give us a docket for sheets and blankets. My mother lit the fire and when we sat around it drinking tea she said at least we're all off the floor and isn't God good.

(Teacher Man, pp. 156-157)