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Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*: A Picture of
an Irish Childhood

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INTRODUCTION

Frank McCourt's bestseller *Angela's Ashes* is mainly set in the slums of Limerick in Ireland during the 1930's and 1940's. The main character Frank, who is the author Frank McCourt's alter ego, was born in America by Irish parents but at the age of four, he and his family return to the city of Limerick in Ireland. During the following two decades, Frank struggles to survive hunger, poverty and the constant impending shadow of Catholicism in both reality and the novel. He is determined to make his dream come true; to return to America one day.

In real life, McCourt eventually managed to escape Limerick and went to America, where he became a teacher. In 1996, after retiring, he decided to turn his childhood memories into a novel and *Angela's Ashes* was born. The novel was an international success and has won many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1997. It has also been turned into a film in 1999, which was highly praised by the critics.

On first reading *Angela's Ashes*, many might be fascinated but at the same time also horrified by the descriptions of the tough and difficult Irish childhood and its Catholic elements. It is commonly known that there is a special bond between Ireland and Catholicism. While reading, quite a few questions may come to mind: Was it really like this in Ireland? Was this a true picture of Irish childhood? Was Catholicism so widespread? The reason for asking these questions might be that the author is quite straightforward in his descriptions. In fact, McCourt clearly states his view of Irish childhood already on the first page:

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood. (p. 1)

With the quote above serving as the starting point, the aim of this essay is thus to investigate how Frank McCourt pictures Irish childhood in *Angela's Ashes* and to decide if this is a realistic and true picture, or if McCourt exaggerates in his descriptions. The main focus will be on what aspects of such a childhood McCourt brings up and how he relates to and criticizes these aspects. In order to come to as fair a conclusion as possible, it is crucial to understand what part Catholicism played in Irish upbringing and what life was like in Ireland during this period. Therefore these parts will also be included in the investigation.

The essay has been divided into four stages. Firstly, the focus will be on Ireland and Irish childhood in a historical and cultural context, where historical facts will be compared with how Ireland is described in the novel. Secondly, attention will be paid to Catholicism's influence on various institutions and on people. Thirdly, the positive aspects of Irish childhood will be brought up. Lastly, the negative aspects of such a childhood as well as McCourt's criticism of these aspects will be dealt with.

The aim and mode of procedure of this essay have now been described, but there are a few other things that must be made clear. It is important to provide an explanation for the term "the Faith", which often is used by Catholics themselves as synonymous with Catholicism. It is also important to emphasise that when the word "Ireland" appears in the text, it refers to the southern part of Ireland, which formally is named the Republic of Ireland today, not Northern Ireland. Moreover, since it sometimes might be difficult to understand whether references are made to the author Frank McCourt or the character Frank McCourt, "McCourt" refers to the author and "Frank" refers to the character.

1. IRELAND AND IRISH CHILDHOOD IN FACT AND FICTION

First of all, it is necessary to establish in what kind of shape Ireland was at the beginning of the 1930's. When the McCourt family arrived in Ireland in 1934 after the voyage from America, the country lay waste from the fight for independence. Ireland had left the nineteenth century as a part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, which was formed in 1801. Now, however, the Irish started to long for independence. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, quite a few rebellions against the rule of the British in Ireland took place and the IRA (Irish Republican Army) was formed to fight for a self-governing country. The most famous of these rebellions was the Easter Rising in 1916, which was an armed uprising with the goal of creating an Irish republic. After centuries lined with discontent, the Irish began seeing results. In 1920, southern Ireland was granted home rule by the British (but Northern Ireland still belonged to Britain). Two years later, when the Irish Civil War (1922-23) was fought, the Irish Free State was established. A few years after the Second World War, during which Ireland remained neutral, the Irish Free State was officially declared the Republic of Ireland (Killeen, pp. 14-15, 86-96 and 100-102).

It is fairly easy to conclude that a large part of Irish history consists of wars and the struggle for independence, but where is the place of a child in all this? After reading Angela's Ashes, it becomes evident that children's lives in Ireland during the 1930's and 1940's were not easy. The picture McCourt paints of his own childhood in Angela's Ashes is neither a harmonious and warm nor a pretty picture. It is actually quite the contrary. What he describes is an everyday struggle for survival, where poverty and alcoholism are as common as declamatory clergymen and harassing teachers:

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. (p. 1)

This description is of course a generalisation; not every father was an alcoholic, nor was every priest pompous and so on. However, in Frank's case, this sombre picture of life is accurate. His family never has any money since his father, Malachy, is unemployed for the greater part of Frank's childhood. When Malachy finally succeeds in getting a job, he squanders his salary

at the local pub. The descriptions of unemployment and its consequences in the book agree with historical facts since unemployment was one of the biggest problems in Ireland during this time. Before the 1930's, there had been a fall in unemployment, but suddenly it started to rise quite rapidly and a large part of the population was out of work. Many people were frustrated and driven into seeking comfort in alcohol (Lee, pp. 126 and 647). In the novel, Malachy's absence and his inability to get a job leave Frank, his siblings and his mother, Angela, without food and they have no other choice than to beg and depend on other people's charity. When neither Frank's mother nor his father brings home food, the responsibility falls on Frank, who is the oldest child, and he is sometimes forced to steal (p. 26 and passim). The only bright spot in his life seems to be when he is allowed to escape reality for an hour or two at the cinema, preferably while chewing cheap toffee (p. 160 and passim).

Hunger and poverty are not the only obstacles Frank must overcome in the book. Diseases such as typhus and consumption rage the Limerick slums, where it is difficult to avoid being infected by these illnesses due to the crowded living arrangements. The McCourt family is surrounded by fleas and lice and their house is beneath contempt with a flooded kitchen and one single lavatory for a whole street. With such bad living conditions, it is not strange that small children often died a premature death. In Frank's family, three of his seven brothers and sisters die of different diseases and malnutrition. In reality, a historian has described the conditions in Ireland during the 1940's as "appalling" (Coogan, p. 338).

Historians have also noticed that teachers in Ireland during the decades when Frank grew up "had no training in the psychology of the young, other than how to repress and mould them"(Coogan, p. 735). It is possible to argue that this description of teachers concurs with how teachers are depicted by the author in the novel, where the character Frank witnesses the teachers' tyrannical behaviour at school. The teachers do not hesitate to physically punish, humiliate or brand a child as an idiot. Frank eventually learns how to tackle his teachers by figuring out what they want their students to say or not to say:

Mr. Benson hates America and you have to remember to hate America or he'll hit you. Mr. O'Dea hates England and you have to remember to hate England or he'll hit you. If you ever say anything good about Oliver Cromwell they'll all hit you. (p. 85)

This description shows how the students always have to watch their tongues and that they never have the right to form their own opinions or draw their own conclusions.

It has now been proved that the description of Irish childhood in Angela's Ashes agrees with historical and cultural facts. This has led to critics having commented on how Frank's upbringing is depicted in the book. A critic has even argued that "Frank McCourt wasn't raised" at all (Kirtz, pp. 8-11), thereby suggesting that there is no adult in the novel who teaches Frank about life. This might be true in the sense that neither of his parents is very focused on telling Frank what is right or wrong. Their main concern is to make sure that there is food on the table and that their children are healthy. However, it might be possible to claim that Frank is raised by the Limerick slum. By living there, by meeting the people he meets and by trying to climb the social ladder, Frank learns how to act, what to expect and what he needs to do in order to survive. Frank desperately wants to get away from the difficult life in the slum, but he can never escape the fact that the Limerick slum has helped form him, his thoughts and his values in life. In other words, the slum has the same effect on Frank as a parent should have.

2. THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF CATHOLICISM

The Catholic church in Ireland has been an extremely powerful institution all through the twentieth century. It has been said that Catholicism was "the bandage wrapped around the bleeding soul of a majority of the people" (Coogan, p. 748). One possible interpretation of this striking comparison is that the Irish people turned to religion when no one else could help them improve their poor and miserable lives. What also helped the church to its prominent position in society was the 1937 constitution, which included interesting articles that helped Catholicism tighten its grip on the Irish people. Already when Ireland was granted home rule, it was said that "Home Rule is Rome Rule", meaning that letting the Irish govern themselves was the same as if the Vatican had ruled the country (Lee, p. 8). The old constitution had not mentioned any religion at all. Still, some laws had been designed to support Catholic attitudes and beliefs. In the new constitution, "the Faith" was given much space and Catholic thoughts suddenly became the law. Divorce, for instance, became illegal since religion prohibited it (Coogan, p. 170). What pinpointed the position of the Catholic church was a part of Article 44, which read as follows:

The State recognises the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the faith professed by the great

majority of the citizens. (qtd in Coogan, pp. 220-221 and in Nowlan, pp. 111-112)

In other words, following the law and being a true Catholic was suddenly intimately connected. Irish society became quite similar to a theocratic society. However, practically all of the Irish people were already followers of this religion, which meant that they had no objections to this article. A rather good description of this new constitution was that it bore “a distinctively Catholic and Irish flavour” (Nowlan, p. 113).

However, “the Faith” was fortified among the people through other means as well. It is commonly known that the Irish clung to Catholicism as a silent protest against the rule of British in Ireland. Furthermore, it has been argued that “as Mother England vacated the corridors of power, Mother Church took them over” (Coogan, p. 170), leaving the church in a high and influential position. Consequently, the Catholic church managed to penetrate most parts of everyday life; it was particularly noticeable in the fields of education, health and politics. It has also been pointed out that the Irish, above all, saw themselves as Catholics and that enabled the Catholic church to exert great influence on social and cultural life. Over 90 per cent of the population in the Republic of Ireland was, and still is, Roman Catholic (Cleary, pp. 63 and 67-68).

In this context, it is relevant to bring up the authority of the clergy. In a country so deeply religious as Ireland was, it was natural that priests and clergymen became powerful and influential. Being a Catholic bishop during the middle of the twentieth century in Ireland has been described as a “guarantee of immense deference and prestige” (Killeen, p. 102). The authoritarianism of the Irish Catholic church and its priests has actually been compared to fascism in the sense that it is based on the same ideas (Coogan, p 204). The clergy in Angela’s Ashes is as authorial as the clergy was in reality. At one point in the book, Frank benefits from the authority of a priest. After losing his job as a telegram boy at the post office, his mother, Angela, begs the office to rehire Frank but they refuse. Only when the office receives a letter from a parish priest, in which the priest orders the office to give Frank his job back, the office suddenly has no objection: “Take the boy back, says the parish priest. Oh, yes, Father, indeed, says the post office” (p. 385).

It is obvious that Frank’s attitude towards Protestants is highly influenced by the Catholic clergy in the novel. Priests tell him that “the Faith” is the true religion and its followers are the only ones who will avoid hell: “[o]utside the Catholic church there is no salvation” (p. 194). That is to say, Protestants and followers of other religions are doomed.

Frank never questions this, or rather he has no reason to question it since everyone around him has the same beliefs and tells him the same thing. However, the threats about ending up in hell are quite empty because “the Catholic Church has never officially declared anyone to have been damned to hell” (O’Collins, p. 231), but Frank is, of course, not aware of this.

In Angela’s Ashes, “the Faith” does not exercise influence on Frank purely through the clergy. Both in the novel and in reality, the Catholic church is totally in charge of the schools, and thereby it also has power over the students (Coogan, p. 708). In the book, there are some very good examples of this. To begin with, the teachers manage to associate practically everything with religion. One teacher refers to the fact that Jesus died shoeless when he tries to make the students stop teasing each other about their shoes or lack of shoes (p. 116). Frank is also assigned to write an essay about what it would be like if Jesus had lived in Limerick. He names his essay “Jesus and the Weather”, in which he concludes that in that case, the Catholic church would not exist since Jesus probably would have died from consumption (p. 234). Furthermore, Frank and his fellow students are being prepared for confession and communion not in church, but in school (p. 124). This last example shows just how much religion has influenced other institutions, such as schools. The boys are not even asked whether they want to embrace the Catholic faith or not; it is obligatory in school and simply something that is supposed to be done without questioning. These descriptions illustrate how Catholicism has managed to penetrate and influence even the smallest issues in life in McCourt’s novel as well as in reality.

There is no doubt that the Catholic church has influenced various institutions as well as another equally, if not even more, important area, namely the mind. In the novel, Frank does not come across as a very religious person. For instance, when he receives communion for the first time, he is more interested in the money, which the boys may collect since it is a special day, and going to the cinema for the money he earns than in the symbolic implications of the whole event (p. 141). In the Catholic church, baptised children must, when they reach adolescence, confirm their baptism by receiving Holy Communion. This is the first time children receive the bread and wine that represent Jesus’ body and blood. It is a solemn ritual that signals “mature faith commitment” (O’Collins, pp. 246-250). That is to say, by receiving Holy Communion, the children are considered to be old enough to take religion seriously, follow the Catholic rules and lead a good Catholic life.

Even though Frank dismisses the actual point of the ritual, he still measures intelligence by whether a person has received Holy Communion or not. In McCourt’s book, Frank, who is both baptised and later also confirmed, is raised as a Catholic and must follow

the religion's rules and traditions, but he might not be a true believer of "the Faith". However, in his way of thinking and feeling it is possible to find certain aspects which can be said to have been influenced by this faith. As mentioned above, Holy Communion is in itself not an important event in Frank's eyes. In spite of this, he blames his younger brother's inability to understand a story on the fact that he has not received communion yet (p. 137). At this point in the novel, Frank is about eight years old and his brother is only one year younger, which means that the intellectual gap between them should not be that big. What can be concluded from this is that Frank equals Holy Communion with a certain degree of maturity and knowledge; in other words, communion makes him smarter than his brother.

Another example of Frank's Catholic way of thinking in *Angela's Ashes* is when he compares his father to the Holy Trinity (p. 239). In Christianity, the Holy Trinity is the idea of God being one and at the same time three: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (O'Collins, pp. 141-146). This concept does not only exist within Catholicism; it can also be found in other Christian religions, such as Protestantism. However, it is commonly known that Catholicism has a much tighter grip around its followers than, for instance, Protestantism; Catholic ideas and reasoning penetrate people's minds to a greater extent. In the novel, Frank comes to think of the concept of the Holy Trinity when he thinks that there are three sides of his father: one that reads the paper, one that tells stories and one that is drunk. By making this comparison, Frank expresses his thoughts and feelings by referring to a concept that is connected to Catholicism. That is to say, when trying to explain something or make a comparison, he places the message he wants to convey in a religious context.

In the novel, Frank turns to his beliefs not only when he makes comparisons, but also when he wants to ask for something or needs help. In those cases, he addresses the saints, who are very important and often associated with the Catholic church. Followers of "the Faith", who have lived a virtuous life or died a martyr's death, can become saints. The person is then in "heavenly glory" and can be prayed to everywhere and anytime (Hardon, p. 485). Catholics pray to different saints because they are patrons of different things or issues. In *Angela's Ashes*, the characters often address saints. A good example of this is when Frank describes how his mother was born. His grandmother is having problems giving birth and starts to pray to St. Gerard Majella, patron saint of expectant mothers. Unfortunately, he neither helps her nor eases her pain so she turns to other saints:

My grandmother switches her prayers to St Ann, patron saint of difficult labor. But the child won't come. Nurse O'Halloran tells my grandmother, Pray to St. Jude, patron saints of desperate cases. (p. 4)

Another example of how important saints are in the book is when Frank has a penny and gives up his favourite thing, toffee, in favour of lighting a candle for a saint, which costs a penny. At this point, he is recovering from having been seriously ill in typhus for quite some time and is still very weak. When returning to school, he is told that he must be put back a year to fifth class since he has missed many lessons during his illness. Frank does not want this and turns to a saint for help:

I find a penny in the street that first day back at school and I want to run to Kathleen O'Connell's [shop] for a big square of Cleeve's toffee ... I'm desperate for the Cleeve's toffee but I'm also desperate to get out of fifth class.

I know I have to go to the statue of St. Francis of Assisi. He's the only one who will listen but he's at the other end of Limerick and it takes me an hour to walk there, sitting on steps, holding on to walls. (p. 232)

What can be concluded from this is that despite the pain and weakness Frank still feels from being sick, he struggles to the other side of town just to light a candle for a saint. This shows how important saints are to Catholics and how they believe that saints are they only ones that will help them. All they have to do is pray and their problems will be solved.

Another area that often is associated with Catholicism is the sacraments since they, just as saints, only exist in this religion. Frank goes through a number of sacramental rites in Angela's Ashes. The seven sacraments are: baptism, confession (also known as penance or reconciliation), confirmation, the Eucharist (or Holy Communion), the anointing of the sick (also called extreme unction), Holy Orders and marriage. These sacraments, or rites, are said to communicate the power and grace of God. They are also a way to worship God. (O'Collins, pp. 234 and 281). In McCourt's novel, Frank receives Holy Communion, he is confirmed and when it is uncertain whether he will recover from typhus or not, he is subjected to extreme unction (pp. 142, 211 and 217). Confession is a sacrament that causes some problems for Frank in the novel. Within the Catholic church, the followers are supposed to seek forgiveness, or absolution as it also is called, for their sins by confessing to a priest.

The priest has the power to forgive and gives the remorseful sinner a punishment, which often consists of a number of prayers. Finally, the sinner is encouraged to say a special prayer for the priest (O'Collins, pp. 275-280). In *Angela's Ashes*, Frank shows no remorse when seeking absolution for masturbating, which is a sin, and has difficulties finding a priest that will forgive him:

The priests of Limerick have no patience with the likes of me. I go to confession and they hiss that I'm not in a proper spirit of repentance, that if I were I'd give up this hideous sin. I go from church to church looking for an easy priest till Paddy Clohessy [one of Frank's friends] tells me there's one in the Dominican church who's ninety years old and deaf as a turnip. Every few weeks the old priest hears my confession and mumbles that I should pray for him. Sometimes he falls asleep and I don't have the heart to wake him up so I go to Communion the next day without penance or absolution. It's not my fault if priests fall asleep on me and surely I'm in a state of grace just for going to confession. (p. 341)

This example shows that it is important for Frank to go to confession. The fact that the old priest is not always awake to give him absolution does not seem to bother him so much, just going there is the main thing for him. This seems somewhat odd considering that the point of confession is for the sinner to be forgiven. If Frank does not receive forgiveness and the priest cannot hear his confession, then what is the point of going at all? The answer to this question could be that Frank is desperate for absolution and sometimes he receives it. He prefers to be forgiven by a deaf priest once in a while than to never receive absolution at all. This arrangement is good enough for him and more than the other priests can offer. In other words, Frank takes what little he can get.

3. POSITIVE ASPECTS OF IRISH CHILDHOOD

There is no doubt that Frank's childhood is difficult and harsh in the novel. However, in the midst of all the darkness, some light can be found. Since the children of Limerick do not have any material possessions whatsoever, they have to turn to each other, their families and the common culture for entertainment. This can result in a more closely connected society, where

people care for each other and do things together. For example, Frank says that his Aunt Aggie, who is somewhat better off, has “[e]lectric light and a lavatory but no grand times” (p. 285). Frank believes that he and his family have “grand times” when they do something together. In this case, it was something as simple as a day together in the country followed by an evening by the fire at home that made Frank think that he might be poorer as far as money is concerned, but richer in other areas. This conclusion is supported by what McCourt, the author, later has said in an interview:

That’s the paradox: it was a rich life despite the poverty. It was economic desperation and a cultural richness that kept us going. That, and the dream of getting out. (Turbide, pp. 69-71)

The statement above can also be related to another positive aspect: Frank’s determination to reach his goal. Sometimes when people are economically secure and have what they consider to be a good life, they do not feel the need to work as hard as Frank in order to make their dreams come true. This is because the way to reach their goals is quite enjoyable. Frank, on the other hand, has nothing except his dream of leaving Ireland behind and starting a new and improved life in America one day. This gives him another kind of driving force which is much more powerful. The author has pointed out this fact himself: “When you’re down as low as you can get economically, it gives you a kind of energy you wouldn’t have otherwise” (Turbide, *ibid*).

In Angela’s Ashes, Frank’s Irish childhood also gives him a respectful perspective of life and a more humble attitude in general. Due to his background, he has a better sense of what is important in life and does not pay attention to insignificant issues. He understands what matters in life and focuses on that. In addition to this, he knows how crucial it is to be reverent to others since he has been maltreated himself, especially by his teachers.

There are perhaps not many positive aspects of Irish childhood and McCourt makes no effort to emphasise the few there are. Every time something good happens or something is to the character Frank’s advantage, it is only mentioned in passing so that no great importance is attached to it. One example of this in the book is when Frank’s shoes are worn out. For several pages, the author explains in detail how humiliating it is to have shoes with holes, how children at school make fun of Frank’s shoes and how his father has to mend them with rubber. McCourt ends this story about shoes by simply writing that Frank received shoes from one of the church’s charitable societies, the St. Vincent de Paul Society (pp. 114-

116). If the author had wanted to, then he could surely have written the novel in a more positive tone with more weight on positive events and happenings. In this case, he could have dwelled on the fact that charity came to the family's aid once in a while. However, his intentions might have been to write a novel that will make people aware of how bad conditions used to be for children in Ireland and therefore he has concentrated on the more negative aspects.

4. NEGATIVE ASPECTS AND CRITICISM OF IRISH CHILDHOOD

While describing his younger years, McCourt brings up many negative aspects. Besides poverty and hunger, quite a few of these aspects are connected to the restrictions of the Catholic lifestyle. In *Angela's Ashes*, the author criticizes Irish childhood on the first page, but this is actually the only time he openly passes judgement on this kind of childhood. Nevertheless, by reading between the lines, it is possible to detect some negative critique, which often is disguised as either humour or sarcasm. In this section, a number of negative aspects and criticism of these aspects will be discussed.

The first negative aspect in this respect, which is brought up and criticized on multiple occasions in the novel, has to do with Catholicism and how the followers are constantly threatened with damnation. The clergymen in *Angela's Ashes* scare their parishioners by telling them that everyone who is not a true believer will be doomed, burn in hell or suffer in other ways. Frank bitterly remarks: "Doom. That's the favourite word of every priest in Limerick" (p. 349). It might be argued that McCourt dislikes this aspect of "the Faith"; that it focuses on teaching the followers what not to do instead of telling them what good can come out of being a Catholic. McCourt aims much of his critique at the whole concept of damnation and that it is quite difficult, almost impossible, to avoid. For instance, when Frank is young, he tries really hard to be as religious as possible since he does not wish to go to hell. Then he finds out that he is doing it all in vain because he was conceived before his parents were married and the Catholic church does not approve of premarital sex (O'Collins, p. 348). Thereby, Frank is doomed already before he is even born. When he discusses this dilemma with an older, and in Frank's eyes also all-knowing, friend Mickey Molloy, "the expert on Girls' Bodies and Dirty Things in General" (p. 292), he is told that he cannot do anything to change this. Mickey Molloy has the first line in the following dialogue between himself and Frank:

Anyway, you're doomed. Your father and mother had the excitement [had sex] and they weren't married so you're not in a state of grace.

What am I going to do?

Nothing. You're doomed.

Can't I light a candle or something.

You could try the Blessed Virgin. She's in charge of the doom. (p. 294)

In the context of children and their attitude towards religion, it seems relevant to focus on the Catholic indoctrination performed by certain priests in the novel. It is possible to argue that this is another negative aspect that the author disapproves of. It is, of course, especially children who are subjected to this indoctrination. The priests should, as authorities and thereby also as role models, consider the possible consequences of what they say before speaking, but fail to do so. This often results in priests guiding children towards what is best for the children from a religious point of view. The priests also put stress on ideas, events and concepts that are important within "the Faith". For instance, one priest tells Frank the following: "Books can be dangerous for children, my child. Turn your mind from those silly stories and think of the lives of the saints" (p. 141). This is perhaps not the best advice to give a child still in school because the priest is basically advising Frank not to study or get an education. Instead Frank should be a good Catholic and pray to saints, which are, as pointed out earlier, very important in this religion. The consequence can be that he will have problems getting a job when he is an adult. There seems to be reasons to believe that McCourt criticizes the fact that it was not allowed to question priests and other clergymen in Ireland during his childhood, even though they obviously were wrong from time to time. Arguing against a priest in Catholic Ireland was almost the same thing as arguing against God, and that was not something to be taken lightly.

Thirdly, priests and other adults never tell Frank "the whole picture"; Frank can be told different versions of the same event or story by various people and even though this event or story might seem logical in that specific situation, it never makes sense when Frank adds it all together in his mind. It is possible to describe this as if Frank is receiving pieces of a puzzle, but he has no idea in what order to put the pieces together since no one provides him with that information. In other words, he lacks sufficient information to make sense of what he is told. One example of this is when Frank's father makes his son promise to die for

Ireland, while his teachers tell him that dying for “the Faith”, not Ireland, is glorious. So which is better to die for, the boy starts to think, his country or his religion? Frank’s mother adds to his confusion by forcing him to attend dance classes so that he can dance for Ireland, but how is he supposed to both die and dance for Ireland? This leaves Frank wondering if anyone at all would like him to stay alive (pp. 124, 156 and 211). This example is referred to more than once in the novel, which results in it not being farfetched to assume that McCourt criticizes adults’ attitude towards children in Ireland during the 1930’s and 1940’s. Back then, children were supposed to listen and accept, never question or argue against a grown-up. Adults often underestimate children’s ability to comprehend things and McCourt seems to want to make it clear that children are not as stupid or ignorant as many claim that they are.

The fourth negative aspect is connected to a paradox in *Angela’s Ashes*. The paradox is that the Catholics are taught to forsake everything but their religion and yet when they seek help from their church, they do not always receive it and have no other way to turn. In reality, it was often the church who tried to solve social problems in Ireland. This seems very generous, but the fact is that they did it mostly in order to prevent the ones in trouble from turning to the Protestant church for help (Coogan, pp. 708-709). In *Angela’s Ashes*, the church door is literally slammed in Frank’s face twice; he turns to the church for help but leaves empty-handed both times (pp. 165-167 and 337). By paying attention to the fact that only the church will help the people in *Angela’s Ashes*, McCourt points out that there is a lack of a working social system. The poor in the Limerick society do not seem to have anyone to turn to for financial aid, unless they receive it from the church. Neither in the novel nor in real life does the Irish state provide any “safety net” for families like the McCourt family; they have to manage on their own or else they will starve or freeze to death.

Fifthly, McCourt brings up and disapproves of the fact that it was impossible for poor boys like himself to excel in society, both in reality and in the novel. Boys from the slums were considered filthy, ignorant and stupid. Thus, they did not get any of the good jobs. This problem is brought up in the book when Frank works at the post office and thinks about what it would be like to work as a permanent telegram boy, postman or clerk:

Everyone says these are good jobs, steady and pensionable and respectable, and if you get a job like this you never have to worry again in your whole life, so you don’t. (p. 363)

In the sixth place, the author passes judgement on the fact that many Catholics believe that “the Faith” automatically provides everything that is necessary in life, but if they are not “true” Catholics, who say their prayers, go to church and so on, then they have only themselves to blame for their poor lives. At the beginning of the book, Frank’s father has a kind of “everything will be alright” attitude to life and does not make any great effort to provide for his family. As the story progresses and his children fall ill and some of them die, he starts to think that this is his fault since he never teaches them to pray, to go to church regularly or to be religious in other ways (p. 90). Still, this is not the view of all Catholics. Frank’s mother, on the other hand, realises that people have to do certain things on their own, or else these things will never be done. At one point in the novel, she leaves the house in search of two items that the family is in desperate need of: coal and an onion (one of the children has a fever and boiled onions are supposed to cure it). When she returns with these things, Frank’s father says that he knew that she would be successful since he has prayed to a saint, St. Jude, patron saint of desperate cases. Angela replies: “I got the coal. I got the onion, no help from St. Jude “ (p. 72). This example shows that Frank’s mother believes that she found the coal because she made an effort to find it whereas Frank’s father thinks she found it due to his prayers.

Lastly, other aspects such as poverty, famine, diseases and bad living conditions in general are not to be forgotten. However, it is possible to claim that McCourt does not really disapprove of these aspects of his childhood. One possible explanation of this can be that there is no use in analysing and criticizing them because life was like this for practically everyone in Ireland in those days. It is also all over and done with and besides, it is generally known that Ireland has changed for the better for the past 50 or 60 years. Therefore McCourt might not see the need to complain about something that has already been altered. Rather, he finds it necessary to share his experiences and inform those who read *Angela’s Ashes* about his difficult childhood.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this essay was to investigate how McCourt pictures Irish childhood in his novel *Angela's Ashes*, what aspects of such a childhood he brings up and how he relates to and criticizes these aspects. The investigation also includes what role Catholicism played in it all. A question that must be answered is if McCourt's picture of Irish childhood in his book is realistic or not.

The picture McCourt paints of his childhood in the novel is accurate; the gloomy and negative descriptions of Irish childhood, which includes hunger, poverty and diseases, corresponds well with reality. By comparing how the author depicts Ireland and his younger years in the novel with what real-life historians have observed and concluded, it is easy to see that McCourt's story is very similar, if not identical, to what life was like in Ireland during this period of time. The author's accounts of his father's unemployment, the poor social conditions and the horrible school system all concur with how historians describe the same events or fields.

McCourt's descriptions of the role and influence of the Catholic church in Ireland also appears to be correct. The church has a very strong position in society in the novel. In reality, this was also the case due to many different factors, among others the prominent position of Catholicism in the new constitution. The authority of the clergy, Frank's attitude to Protestants, the influence the church has on schools and how important saints and the seven sacraments are to the people - all of these examples agree with how Catholicism has influenced Ireland in real life. The author does not explicitly deal with how religion influenced people or the way they think and reason, but all the same, it is not difficult to detect that the characters are highly influenced by Catholic thinking and reasoning. In both *Angela's Ashes* and reality, the Catholic church and Ireland are intimately connected and the Irish people are highly influenced by "the Faith". It is obvious that this faith played a significant role in Frank's childhood. In real life, it probably influenced every Irish child that grew up in Ireland during this period to a relatively large extent. It is not an overstatement to say that it was practically impossible for children to grow up in Ireland during the 1930's and 1940's without having any element of Catholicism automatically included in their childhood.

Some of the positive aspects of the Irish childhood depicted in *Angela's Ashes* are the following: a more closely connected society, a flourishing culture that emerges when there is no other entertainment at hand, Frank's strong driving force, his determination to return to America and his more humble and respectful attitude to life and people. However,

the author only brings up positive aspects of Irish childhood in passing. By doing this, the positive aspects are never emphasised, which results in the more negative events and happenings setting the tone of the book.

The negative aspects of the Irish childhood in the novel are much more stressed and sometimes disguised as humour. The author criticizes these aspects by using a sarcastic language. Besides poverty, famine and illnesses, quite a few negative aspects are in one way or another connected to Catholicism. It is possible to argue that McCourt disapproves of the concept of damnation within the church and of children being exposed to Catholic indoctrination. In addition to these negative aspects, McCourt seems to criticise the fact that there was no working social system for poor families in need of help, neither in the novel nor in reality. He also points out that there was no possibility for young, poor boys to advance in Irish society, not in the book and not in the Ireland of those days.

Already on the first page in the book, McCourt clearly states his view of childhood: Irish Catholic childhood is not at all to be recommended; it consists of poverty, alcoholism, horrible teachers and a feeling of defeat. Through the whole novel, the author seems to give prominence to the negative sides of Irish childhood and Catholicism since he really wants to prove his point: Irish childhood is, together with its Catholic elements, miserable. Consequently, McCourt's picture of Irish childhood in the book is very dark. After studying observations of Ireland during the 1930's and 1940's that have been made by historians and experts in Catholicism, there does not seem to be any reason to believe that the author's picture of Irish childhood was any brighter in reality. In other words, McCourt's descriptions in *Angela's Ashes* are both realistic and true.

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