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.” Thus begins Frank McCourt’s powerful memoir, *Angela’s Ashes*.

Frank McCourt was born in Brooklyn, New York, to recently immigrated Irish parents. His father, Malachy McCourt, struggled with alcoholism and unemployment. His mother, Angela Sheehan, bore the grim task of raising young children in the face of unrelenting poverty. In the mid-1930s, the McCourts moved back to Limerick, Ireland, to better their lives.

**An Irish Childhood** In Ireland, however, the McCourts fared no better, given the country’s economic depression, unstable employment, and wretched living conditions. Angela tried to sustain the family by scrimping and saving and by soliciting help from Catholic charities and the government. She also endured the deaths of three of her children.

**Breaking Free** When he was nineteen, McCourt decided to return to the United States to begin a new life. After working a series of jobs, McCourt served in the Korean War, which entitled him to benefits under the GI Bill and funded his education at New York University. He became a teacher and taught in New York City public schools for twenty-seven years.

**A Story to Tell** McCourt knew he had a story to tell and struggled for years trying to tell it. “All along I wanted to do this book badly. I would have to do it or I would have died howling.” In 1996, at the age of sixty-six, he finally published *Angela’s Ashes*.

“**I learned the significance of my own insignificant life.**”

---Frank McCourt

McCourt’s gritty story gripped readers almost immediately. When he wrote *Angela’s Ashes*, McCourt did not want to write something “charming or lyrical.” Instead, he wanted to offer a description of his poverty-stricken Irish childhood that was real and honest. He won several prestigious awards for the book, including the Pulitzer Prize.

Two years later, McCourt followed *Angela’s Ashes* with *Tis*, the second work in his memoir series. *Tis* chronicles his adventures in the United States, including his first job, his time in the military, his college education, and his profession as a teacher. McCourt published another book, in 2005, *Teacher Man*. It is based on his own unique experience of teaching in the U.S. public school system.
Literature and Reading Preview

Connect to the Memoir

When you are sick, what do you do to keep your mind occupied? Write a journal entry about the last time you were sick and what you did or thought about to pass the time.

Build Background

Typhoid fever is an infection spread via food, water, and milk contaminated with the Salmonella typhi bacteria. Diphtheria is a disease caused by bacteria that have been infected by certain viruses. If left untreated, both diseases can be fatal.

Set Purposes for Reading

**Big Idea** The Power of Memory

As you read, ask yourself, How does McCourt portray his childhood decades after he lived it?

**Literary Element** Voice

Voice is the distinctive use of language that conveys the author’s or narrator’s personality. Voice is determined by elements of style such as word choice and tone. As you read, ask yourself, What does the author’s voice reveal about his personality and credibility?

**Reading Strategy** Analyze Style

Style consists of the expressive qualities that distinguish an author’s work, including word choice and the length and arrangement of sentences, as well as the use of figurative language and imagery. As you read, ask yourself, How can analyzing style reveal an author’s attitude and purpose?

**Tip:** Ask Questions Ask yourself questions about style as you read and record them in a chart like the one shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of imagery does McCourt use?</td>
<td>He uses fantastical and nonsensical imagery to create an air of innocence.</td>
<td>“an owl and a pussycat that went to sea in a green boat with honey and money”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learning Objectives

For pages 341–351

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study: Analyzing voice.

Reading: Analyzing style.

Vocabulary

**induce** (in dūs’es) v. to lead or move by persuasion; to bring about; p. 345 The physicians decided to induce labor.

**potent** (pō’tent) adj. having strength or authority; powerful; p. 345 The black widow spider injects a potent poison into its victims.

**rapier** (rā’pē er) n. a narrow, long-bladed, two-edged sword; p. 347 The pirates drew their rapiers and duelled on deck.

**Tip:** Word Origins Remember that knowledge of a word’s origins supplies you with clues to, rather than a full account of, a word’s current meaning.
The other two beds in my room are empty. The nurse says I'm the only typhoid patient and I'm a miracle for getting over the crisis.

The room next to me is empty till one morning a girl's voice says, Yoo hoo, who's there?
I'm not sure if she's talking to me or someone in the room beyond.

Yoo hoo, boy with the typhoid, are you awake?
I am.
Are you better?
I am.
Well, why are you here?
I don't know. I'm still in the bed. They stick needles in me and give me medicine. What do you look like?

I wonder. What kind of a question is that? I don't know what to tell her.

Yoo hoo, are you there, typhoid boy?
I am.

What's your name?
Frank.

That's a good name. My name is Patricia Madigan. How old are you?
Ten.

Oh. She sounds disappointed.

But I'll be eleven in August, next month.

Well, that's better than ten. I'll be fourteen in September. Do you want to know why I'm in the Fever Hospital?

I do.
I have diphtheria and something else. What’s something else? They don’t know. They think I have a disease from foreign parts because my father used to be in Africa. I nearly died. Are you going to tell me what you look like?
I have black hair.
You and millions.
I have brown eyes with bits of green that’s called hazel.
You and thousands.
I have stitches on the back of my right hand and my two feet where they put in the soldier’s blood.
Oh, God, did they?
They did.
You won’t be able to stop marching and saluting.
There’s a swish of habit and click of beads and then Sister Rita’s voice. Now, now, what’s this? There’s to be no talking between two rooms especially when it’s a boy and a girl. Do you hear me, Patricia?
I do, Sister.
Do you hear me, Francis?
I do, Sister.
You could be giving thanks for your two remarkable recoveries. You could be saying the rosary. You could be reading The Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart that’s beside your beds. Don’t let me come back and find you talking.
She comes into my room and wags her finger at me. Especially you, Francis, after thousands of boys prayed for you at the Confraternity.¹ Give thanks, Francis, give thanks.
She leaves and there’s silence for awhile. Then Patricia whispers, Give thanks, Francis, give thanks, and say your rosary, Francis, and I laugh so hard a nurse runs in to see if I’m all right. She’s a very stern nurse from the County Kerry and she frightens me. What’s this, Francis? Laughing? What is there to laugh about? Are you and that Madigan girl talking? I’ll report you to Sister Rita. There’s to be no laughing for you could be doing serious damage to your internal apparatus.
She plods out and Patricia whispers again in a heavy Kerry accent, No laughing, Francis, you could be doin’ serious damage to your internal apparatus. Say your rosary, Francis, and pray for your internal apparatus.
Mam visits me on Thursdays. I’d like to see my father, too, but I’m out of danger, crisis time is over, and I’m allowed only one visitor. Besides, she says, he’s back at work at Rank’s Flour Mills and please God this job will last a while with the war on and the English desperate for flour. She brings me a chocolate bar and that proves Dad is working. She could never afford it on the dole. He sends me notes. He tells me my brothers are all praying for me, that I should be a good boy, obey the doctors, the nuns, the nurses, and don’t forget to say my prayers. He’s sure St. Jude pulled me through the crisis because he’s the patron saint² of desperate cases and I was indeed a desperate case.
Patricia says she has two books by her bed. One is a poetry book and that’s the one she loves. The other is a short history of England and do I want it? She gives it to Seamus,³ the man who mops the floors every day, and he brings it to me. He says, I’m not supposed to be bringing anything from a dipteria room to a typhoid room.

¹ A confraternity is a group of people dedicated to a religious cause.
² A patron saint is a saint to whom a craft, an activity, or the protection of a person or place is dedicated.
³ Seamus (sá' mus)

Voice What does McCourt’s use of voice convey about Patricia’s personality?

Analyze Style McCourt blends narration and dialogue here. What is the effect of this stylistic technique?

344 UNIT 2 NONFICTION
with all the germs flying around and hiding between the pages and if you ever catch dipteraria on top of the typhoid they'll know and I'll lose my good job and be out on the street singing patriotic songs with a tin cup in my hand, which I could easily do because there isn't a song ever written about Ireland's sufferings I don't know.

Oh, yes, he knows Roddy McCorley. He'll sing it for me right enough but he's barely into the first verse when the Kerry nurse rushes in. What's this, Seamus? Singing? Of all the people in this hospital you should know the rules against singing. I have a good mind to report you to Sister Rita.

Ah, God, don't do that, nurse.

Very well, Seamus. I'll let it go this one time. You know the singing could lead to a relapse in these patients.

When she leaves he whispers he'll teach me a few songs because singing is good for passing the time when you're by yourself in a typhoid room. He says Patricia is a lovely girl the way she often gives him sweets from the parcel her mother sends every fortnight. He stops mopping the floor and calls to Patricia in the next room, I was telling Frankie you're a lovely girl, Patricia, and she says, You're a lovely man, Seamus. He smiles because he's an old man of forty and he never had children but the ones he can talk to here in the Fever Hospital. He says, Here's the book, Frankie. Isn't it a great pity you have to be reading all about England after all they did to us, that there isn't a history of Ireland to be had in this hospital.

The book tells me all about King Alfred and William the Conqueror and all the kings and queens down to Edward, who had to wait forever for his mother, Victoria, to die before he could be king. The book has the first bit of Shakespeare I ever read.

The Power of Memory Why might McCourt remember this so many years later?
makes no sense and when I say that Patricia gets huffy and says that’s the last poem she’ll ever read to me. She says I’m always reciting the lines from Shakespeare and they make no sense either. Seamus stops mopping again and tells us we shouldn’t be fighting over poetry because we’ll have enough to fight about when we grow up and get married. Patricia says she’s sorry and I’m sorry too so she reads me part of another poem which I have to remember so I can say it back to her early in the morning or late at night when there are no nuns or nurses about,

because it’s Shakespeare and it’s like having jewels in my mouth when I say the words. If I had a whole book of Shakespeare they could keep me in the hospital for a year.

Patricia says she doesn’t know what induced means or potent circumstances and she doesn’t care about Shakespeare, she has her poetry book and she reads to me from beyond the wall a poem about an owl and a pussycat that went to sea in a green boat with honey and money and it

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding
Riding riding
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.
He’d a French cocked-hat on his forehead, a bunch of lace at his chin,

4. A moor is a wide, boggy expanse of land.
A coat of the claret\(^5\) velvet, and breeches\(^6\)
of brown doe-skin,
They fitted with never a wrinkle, his boots
were up to the thigh.
And he rode with a
jewelled twinkle,
His pistol butts a-twinkle,
His rapier hilt a-twinkle, under the jewelled sky.

Every day I can’t
wait for the doctors
and nurses to leave
me alone so I can
learn a new verse
from Patricia and find
out what’s happening
to the highwayman
and the landlord’s
red-lipped daughter. I
love the poem
because it’s exciting and almost as good as
my two lines of Shakespeare. The redcoats
are after the highwayman because they
know he told her, I’ll come to thee by
moonlight, though hell should bar the way.
I’d love to do that myself, come
by moonlight for Patricia in the next
room, though hell should bar the way. She’s
ready to read the last few verses when in
comes the nurse from Kerry shouting at
her, shouting at me, I told ye there was to
be no talking between rooms. Diphtheria
is never allowed to talk to typhoid and visa versa. I warned ye. And she calls out,

Seamus, take this one. Take the by. Sister
Rita said one more word out of him and
upstairs with him. We gave ye a warning
to stop the blathering but ye wouldn’t.
Take the by, Seamus, take him.
Ah, now, nurse, sure isn’t he harmless.
’Tis only a bit o’ poetry.
Take that by, Seamus, take him at once.
He bends over me and whispers, Ah,
God, I’m sorry, Frankie. Here’s your
English history book. He slips the book
under my shirt and lifts me from the bed.
He whispers that I’m a feather. I try to see
Patricia when we pass through her room
but all I can make out is a blur of dark
head on a pillow.

Sister Rita stops us in the hall to tell me
I’m a great disappointment to her, that she
expected me to be a good boy after what
God had done for me, after all the prayers
said by hundreds of boys at the
Confraternity, after all the care from the
nuns and nurses of the Fever Hospital, after
the way they let my mother and father in to
see me, a thing rarely allowed, and this is
how I repaid them lying in the bed reciting
silly poetry back and forth with Patricia
Madigan knowing very well there was a
ban on all talk between typhoid and diph-
theria. She says I’ll have plenty of time to
reflect on my sins in the big ward upstairs
and I should beg God’s forgiveness for my
disobedience reciting a pagan English poem
about a thief on a horse and a maiden with
red lips who commits a terrible sin when I
could have been praying or reading the life
of a saint. She made it her business to read
that poem so she did and I’d be well
advised to tell the priest in confession.

The Kerry nurse follows us upstairs
gasping and holding on to the banister. She
tells me I better not get the notion she’ll be

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5. Claret, also the name of a red wine, is a dark, purplish red
color.
6. Breeches is an old term for pants.

Voice What does this statement tell you about the
narrator’s personality?

Vocabulary

Rapier (ra’ pé ar) n. a narrow, long-bladed,
two-edged sword

The Power of Memory Why do you think McCourt
remembers and is able to re-create details like this?
running up to this part of the world every time I have a little pain or a twinge.

There are twenty beds in the ward, all white, all empty. The nurse tells Seamus put me at the far end of the ward against the wall to make sure I don’t talk to anyone who might be passing the door, which is very unlikely since there isn’t another soul on this whole floor. She tells Seamus this was the fever ward during the Great Famine long ago and only God knows how many died here brought in too late for anything but a wash before they were buried and there are stories of cries and moans in the far reaches of the night. She says ‘twould break your heart to think of what the English did to us, that if they didn’t put the blight on the potato they didn’t do much to take it off. No pity. No feeling at all for the people that died in this very ward, children suffering and dying here while the English feasted on roast beef and guzzled the best of wine in their big houses, little children with their mouths all green from trying to eat the grass in the fields beyond, God bless us and save us and guard us from future famines.

Seamus says ‘twas a terrible thing indeed and he wouldn’t want to be walking these halls in the dark with all the little green mouths gaping at him. The nurse takes my temperature, ‘Tis up a bit, have a good sleep for yourself now that you’re away from the chatter with Patricia Madigan below who will never know a gray hair.

She shakes her head at Seamus and he gives her a sad shake back.

Nurses and nuns never think you know what they’re talking about. If you’re ten going on eleven you’re supposed to be simple like my uncle Pat Sheehan who was dropped on his head. You can’t ask ques-

8. *Limerick* is the town in Ireland in which the story takes place. The *Limerick Leader* is a local publication, probably a newspaper.

**Voice** What does this tell you about the narrator’s level of maturity?

The Power of Memory How do you think Patricia’s death and her sorrow over McCourt’s departure affected McCourt?
After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

Respond and Interpret

1. (a) How did you feel after reading the selection? (b) What specifically about the selection made you feel this way? Explain.

2. (a) What is the first reason Sister Rita gives for telling Frank and Patricia not to talk to each other? (b) What does this tell you about the time period and setting in which this selection takes place?

3. (a) What are the subjects of McCourt's and Patricia's poetry? (b) What does their love for these written passages tell you about their different tastes in literature?

4. (a) Which patients had Frankie's new ward previously housed? (b) How does this knowledge affect the mood of the selection?

Analyze and Evaluate

5. Does Frank and Patricia's dialogue sound like the dialogue of a ten-year-old and a fourteen-year-old? Illustrate your answer with examples from the text.

6. What kind of effect do you think the portrayal of the adults has on the excerpt as a whole?

Connect

7. **Big Idea** The Power of Memory. Do you think this selection reads more like fiction or nonfiction? Explain.

8. Connect to Today In "Typhoid Fever", the sick children entertain themselves and each other by reciting poetry. What might sick children look to for entertainment in a hospital today?

Primary Source Quotation

A Child's Perspective

McCourt waited many years to write *Angela's Ashes* because he needed time to understand his painful childhood. As he says, "I couldn’t have written this book fifteen years ago because I was carrying a lot of baggage around. . . . and I had attitudes and these attitudes had to be softened. I had to get rid of them, I had to become, as it says in the Bible, as a child. . . . The child started to speak in this book. And that was the only way to do it, without judging."

**Group Activity** Discuss the following questions with classmates. Refer back to the quotation and cite evidence from the selection for support.

1. Why do you think it was important for McCourt to become "as a child" in *Angela's Ashes*?

2. What are some ways in which the excerpt reflects the perspective of a child? Support your answer with specific examples.
Literary Element  Voice

An author uses voice to communicate his personality or opinions to the reader. The voice in an autobiographical work such as Angela’s Ashes is the voice of the author’s younger self as perceived by his adult self. When analyzing a writer’s voice, look at how the writer uses elements such as sentence structure, word choice, and tone.

1. Is the voice in this selection credible as that of a young boy or that of an adult? Explain.

2. What stylistic devices does McCourt use to create his narrator’s voice?

Review: Memoir

As you learned on pages 284–285, memoir is a type of narrative nonfiction that presents the story of a period in the writer’s life. It is usually written from the first-person point of view and emphasizes the narrator’s own experience of this period. It may also reveal the impact of significant historical events on his or her life.

Partner Activity  With a classmate, discuss “Typhoid Fever” as a memoir. Working with your partner, create a two-column chart similar to the one below. Fill in the left-hand column with examples of historical details or events referenced in the text. In the right-hand column, describe each example’s effect on the author’s life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical Detail or Event</th>
<th>Effect on Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>old-fashioned medicine</td>
<td>had to stay isolated in the Fever Hospital</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading Strategy  Analyze Style

SAT Skills Practice

1. The opening dialogue between the narrator and Patricia (pages 343–344) serves to

   (A) inform the reader about health care in Ireland
   (B) prepare the reader for tragedy
   (C) reveal the average child’s mature thinking skills
   (D) show children to be open and honest with each other
   (E) point out differences in the way boys and girls view the same situation

Vocabulary Practice

Practice with Word Origins  Studying the etymology, or origin and history, of a word can help you understand and explore its meaning. Create a word map like the one below for each of these vocabulary words from the text.

induce  potent  rapier

EXAMPLE:

**Definition**  an historical account told in time order  **Etymology**  Greek chronos means “time”

**chronicle**

Sample Sentence

The novel was a chronicle of three generations.

Academic Vocabulary

The Sisters did not want to expose the children to other diseases.

Expose is a multiple-meaning word. A hiker might be exposed to the elements, or a reporter might expose the illegal actions of a government official. Use context clues to try to figure out the meaning of expose in the sentence above about the memoir. Check your guess in a dictionary.

For more on academic vocabulary, see pages 52 and 53.