

Grade level: 10-12  
Famine curriculum

Lesson aim: To determine the mood of McCourt's passage about his experience with brutal schoolmasters in Leamy's National School.

New York State Standards: Language for Literary Response and Expression. Students will compare and contrast two texts on a similar subject.

Background: Frank McCourt's memoir Angela's Ashes describes his boyhood at a tough public school for poor boys in Limerick. Gerard Hannan also attended Leamy's National School and describes how boys were brutalized, but he recalls the moment when a boy rebelled and became a school legend. Corporal punishment was allowed in Irish schools until the late 1960s. In fact the Department of Education issued a regulation paddle as a way of controlling the way it was administered.

Lesson:

1. Read McCourt's description of corporal punishment in Leamy's school. How does McCourt arrange his sentences to get a particular effect? What is it? What is the effect of repeating the word "hit"?

2. McCourt's memoir is told in a boy's voice. Is the language of the passage the language of a young boy? What is it about the language of the passage that makes you recognize that a boy is the speaker? Does he assume that someone is listening to his story?

3. What images are especially vivid in this passage?

4. What words has McCourt chosen for this passage? What is the difference in connotation between hit and slap?

4. How does McCourt use details to show how vulnerable students were to masters' likes and dislikes? The Irish language (Gaelic) is a school subject, and boys at Leamy's were expected to know prayers like the Hail Mary in Irish. Eamon DeValera and Michael Collins took opposing sides in the Irish Civil War (1922-1923). Oliver Cromwell's name is notorious in Irish history. He was sent to Ireland in 1649 to enforce the control of the English parliament in Ireland and especially to supervise the transportation of Catholics from their good lands to barren lands in the west of Ireland to create large estates for loyal Protestant settlers. He was in Ireland less than one year, but he is remembered for his reign of terror burning towns and massacring their populations. "The curse of Cromwell on you" is a popular taunt even today.

5. Gerard Hannan's Ashes is a response to McCourt's Angela's Ashes that acknowledges the poverty of a Limerick boyhood while demonstrating that the resources of community spirit mediated a boy's sense of economic deprivation. While Hannan's recollections of Leamy's National School are as grim as McCourt's, he recalls the legend of Thurlogh "Towser" O'Casey. Is the voice a boy's or a man looking back on his boyhood? How does Hannan arrange his sentences? What kind of language does he use? What is the most vivid image in the passage? What words create the mood of Leamy's School? Why does Hannan add the detail about Happy's stolen watch?

HW: Write an essay comparing and contrasting McCourt and Hannan. Consider sentence structure, language, images, diction and details. Which is the better written passage? Why? Which passage do you like better? Why?