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Living Conditions in *Angela's Ashes*

Michaela Hrdá

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Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

An important part of this BP should be an examination of social issues including education systems in Ireland of the 1930's-40's. Another significant theme is both how these issues, including employment, social mobility, poverty, and religion are shown in American literary works as well as how Ireland generally has been represented. Specific literary works of Irish immigrants can be briefly compared to ones by other newly-arrived immigrants to America in the 20th century; works by second or third generation Irish immigrants can be compared to earlier ones. The idea of America as a land of opportunity in ANGELA'S ASHES and in other works of Irish and other immigrant fiction should be critically evaluated in terms of what was possible and what was reality. A brief description of Irish social history of the period the memoir is set in should be featured, especially as represented in literary works then and now. A short biography of McCourt should be included along with a brief overview of his most important works and themes, concluding with a concise summary of the plot and themes of ANGELA'S ASHES. In the last part a comparison of the plot of the book and actual historical events can be undertaken. The dynamics of popular fiction and mass market publishing may be touched upon here.

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Daniel Paul Sampey, MFA

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prof. PhDr. Petr Vorel, CSc.
děkan

L.S.



Mgr. Šárka Bubíková, Ph.D.
vedoucí katedry

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Souhlasím s prezenčním zpřístupněním své práce v Univerzitní knihovně.

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Abstract

This paper is focused on living condition and Ireland and their depiction in *Angela's Ashes*. The thesis includes biography of the writer, his significant works along with a short summary of the book. Living conditions are depicted from the point of view of housing, health, food, poverty, alcoholism, and unemployment. The last part of the thesis is devoted to the position of the book in Irish-American literature. This part further includes polemic on the fiction and reality, and on the gender of the book.

Key word

Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*, living conditions, Ireland

Souhrn

Tato práce se zabývá životními podmínkami v Irsku a jejich vyobrazením v knize *Andělin popel*. Bakalářská práce zahrnuje autorův životopis, ohlédnutí se za jeho důležitými díly společně s krátkým shrnutím obsahu rozebírané knihy. Životní podmínky jsou vyobrazeny z pohledu bydlení, zdraví, stravovacích návyků, chudoby, alkoholismu, či nezaměstnanosti. Poslední část práce je věnována pozici díla v irsko-americké literatuře. Tato část dále zahrnuje polemiku o kombinaci fikce a reality, a debatu o žánru knihy.

Klíčová slova

Frank McCourt, *Andělin popel*, životní podmínky, Irsko

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1. Introduction

"When I look back at my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood." (McCourt, 1996, p. 1)

Ireland at the beginning of the 20th century was one of the poorest countries in Europe. The living conditions of the poor were appalling. In the era of the Great Depression there was minimal chance of finding a proper job. Slum areas, where electricity and water were considered to be something of a rarity, grew larger and the staple diet of the daily food of the poor was just scraps of bread and black tea. No wonder Irish people were heavy drinkers, who seized every possible opportunity for leaving their native country; the emigration slowed mainly during the Great Depression. However, the number of people crossing the Atlantic Ocean was still high.

Angela's Ashes by Frank McCourt became a bestseller from the first day of its publication. Over 4 million copies have been sold; it has been published in 27 countries and has been translated into 17 different languages. The book won many prestigious awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Biography and the Los Angeles Times Book Award. No wonder that it was internationally celebrated as a tremendous success; *Angela's Ashes* includes everything that a perfect book should be like, for instance, cheerful or heartbreaking parts. McCourt's memoir won favour with an extensive range of readers, me included. Seeing the film fervently encouraged me in reading the book, which inspired me to engage in learning more about the living conditions in Ireland in the first half of the 20th century, which will be further examined in this bachelor paper.

The first part of my bachelor paper concerns salient facts about Frank McCourt. His biography and seminal works are incorporated in this section. Furthermore, it is followed by short a summary of the book *Angela's Ashes*.

The following section is devoted to life in Ireland in the first half of the 20th century. It begins with the short description of the key historical events, and their connection with *Angela's Ashes* followed by comparative analyses of living conditions in Ireland. This part deals

mainly with housing, health and illnesses and lack of food. Diverse types of poverty along with unemployment in Ireland are mentioned in this section.

The last chapter focuses on *Angela's Ashes* in the context of Irish-American literature. The question of the American dream is further discussed in terms of what was expected and what the reality was. This part provides examples of criticism about the author's combination of historical facts with fiction, which *Angela's Ashes* provoked. This section also includes a polemic on the book's genre.

The primary purpose of this paper is to examine the ways of how Frank McCourt describes living conditions in *Angela's Ashes*, compare it with the general living conditions of Ireland in the first half of the 20th century and depict it from various points of view.

2. Frank McCourt and His Work

2.1 Biography

Frank McCourt (born as Francis McCourt) was born on August 19th 1930 in Brooklyn, New York, to parents who were Irish immigrants. As his father could not find any work, the McCourts returned to Ireland, which could be surprising because there was even slimmer chance of finding any occupation. They sank deeper into the poverty, which McCourt describes so movingly in his memoir, *Angela's Ashes*. (*Academy of Achievement: The Writer Risen from Ashes*)

Frank McCourt left school at the relatively early age of 13. Afterwards, he alternated between several jobs and petty crime in order to feed himself, his mother, and three surviving brothers. When he was nineteen years old, he returned to the United States and worked at odd jobs until he was drafted into the United States Army at the onset of the Korean War. McCourt spent the war stationed in Germany, and after his return started studying. Although he had never attended any high school, because of his high intelligence and knowledge of literature, he was accepted as a student at New York University. After graduation, he began working for the New York City Public School system, where he lectured for the next 27 years. (*Academy of Achievement: The Writer Risen from Ashes*)

In 1961, Frank McCourt married Alberta Small, a Rhode Island Episcopalian with whom he had a daughter, Margaret. He got married for a second time in August 1984 to psychotherapist

Cheryl Ford. In 1995, McCourt married Ellen Frey, a former television public-relations executive, with whom, following the success of *Angela's Ashes*, he bought a fancy apartment on New York's Upper West Side and a converted 18th-century farmhouse in Connecticut. Frank McCourt died on July 19th, 2009 in New York City at the age of 78. He is survived by Ellen, his daughter Maggie, his granddaughter Chiara, grandsons Frank, Jack, and Avery, and his three brothers and their families. (*The Telegraph: Frank McCourt*)

2.2. Important Works

Frank McCourt was accused of starting an "epidemic of misery memoirs" with *Angela's Ashes*, which was published in 1996, and where the grinding poverty in 1930s' Ireland is depicted on every page (*The Telegraph: Frank McCourt*). Imbued with Frank McCourt's humour and compassion, *Angela's Ashes* is a glorious book that bears all the marks of a classic. Since the book came out, over 4 million copies have been sold, it has been published in 27 countries and has been translated into 17 different languages. The book won McCourt the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Award, the ABBY Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Biography. (*Academy of Achievement: The Writer Risen from Ashes*)

Angela's Ashes illustrates the everyday life difficulties of Angela McCourt, her husband, Malachy and their children. McCourt describes the living conditions in Limerick in the 1930's, the Irish city where the family returns from the USA due to the Great Depression. Fortunately for Frank, the book also ends in the USA when he returns at the age of 19. "His second book *'Tis*, picked up the story of his life where *Angela's Ashes* left off, with his arrival in America." (*Academy of Achievement, The Writer Risen from Ashes*) Now he is far from his family and has to negotiate with a world full of total strangers in order to create his own life. It shot to the top of the best-seller lists as soon as it was published in 1999. (*The Telegraph, Frank McCourt*).

His 2005 memoir, *Teacher Man*, chronicled his 27-year career in the New York City school system. He shares his reminiscences of lecturing as well as revealing how they led to his own success. Like its predecessor, it became an instant bestseller. (*Academy of Achievement: The Writer Risen from Ashes*)

2.3. Summary of *Angela's Ashes*

The memoir begins with a description of how the narrator's parents Angela Sheehan and Malachy McCourt met in New York City. Angela was compelled to marry Malachy when she becomes pregnant with Frank.

Malachy is not able to find much work in the Depression era in New York City and when he does find some he spends all his wages on alcohol. Another child was born a year later after Frank and named Malachy after his Father. Malachy stops drinking when the first girl Margaret is born, however, the baby dies shortly after and Angela falls into a deep depression. Angela cannot stand the flat, the neighbourhood or even America anymore, as she sees the dead baby everywhere around her. Later twins Oliver and Eugene are born. Their cousins send a letter to Angela's mother and pay for the McCourts tickets to Ireland. Nonetheless, it is right there that the downward spiral into alcohol and poverty gets much worse.

Malachy continues his cycle of finding work, drinking, and losing work over and over again. The twins, Oliver and Eugene, die from pneumonia. Their house floods and they are forced to move upstairs. They imagine that they are going on their holiday to warmer foreign place such as Italy. That is why their upstairs, where they spend every winter, is called Italy. They call downstairs Ireland and stay there just during the springs and summers. Soon more children, Michael and later Alphie are born.

Shortly after his confirmation, he falls ill with typhoid fever and must be hospitalised for months. Here he is introduced to Shakespeare by a dying girl and Shakespeare immediately becomes his favourite writer.

His father Malachy decides to leave the family during the World War II in order to find work, leaving Angela and his sons in a desperate situation. At first he sends a little from his wages. When he comes back for Christmas he brings half bar of chocolate and when he leaves once more, the family do not see him ever again. The McCourts sink even deeper into poverty and have to rely on the Saint Vincent de Paul Society.

Now it is Frankie who is the breadwinner of the family. He is only eleven when helps his neighbour Mr. Hannon to deliver coal. Frank enjoys the feeling of responsibility he gets from

working, but unfortunately for him, he soon loses the job. After that he suffers from an eye infection, which gets worse and worse because of the coal dust.

The McCourts get evicted from their lodgings, after burning one of the house's walls for fuel. They have to move in with Angela's cousin Laman Griffin who treats Frank with great dislike. Frank is very upset when he finds out that his mother is sleeping with Laman. After Frank and Laman fall out in a bitter quarrel, Frank is compelled to move in with his uncle Ab, where he soon goes hungry.

When he reaches thirteen, Frank leaves school and starts his first proper job as a telegram boy, which gives him a feeling of independence and maturity. As he delivers telegrams he meets different kinds of people. One of them is Mrs. Fineucne. He starts writing letters for her. In these letters he threatens her customers who owe her money. One night, Mrs. Fineucne dies and Frank steals the money that she makes from the poor in Limerick and throws her ledger into the river. Then he buys a ticket to America. Though he is sad to leave behind Ireland and his family, Frank has great expectations for the future.

3. Ireland in the First Half of the 20th Century

In *Angela's Ashes* appalling living conditions are reflected in many ways. The family moves from slum to slum, the father desperately looks for jobs and if he finds any, he spends his entire wages on alcohol, so they do not have little to feed their starving children. "My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead they return to Ireland when I was four" (McCourt 1996, p. 1). With these words Frank McCourt starts his first famous book *Angela's Ashes*.

From real historical events in the previous century like the Great famine or the war with England is clear that it did not lead to happy times. In the era of the Great Depression the figures for unemployment and poverty were very high, housing standards were very low, and poor diet and appalling living conditions caused many diseases. From all these factors, which are analysed in following chapter, it is more than obvious that Ireland was not the best place to live.

3.1. Significant Historical Events

Between the years 1842 and 1847 there was the Great Famine in Ireland. Almost 1 million people died because of a potato disease commonly known as potato blight. As potatoes were the most important foodstuff, Irish people were starving and millions of them emigrated from Ireland.

The people in the 1930's and 1940's were afraid that something like that could happen again. They spoke about the great famine with respect and perceived it as the hardest time for Ireland in their history. (Chlump 2002, p. 8) Also in *Angela's Ashes* the Great Famine is mentioned many times. For instance, when Frank is expelled from his room for unacceptable behaviour¹ and put in the room with 20 beds, which are all empty, the nurse told him: "This was the fever ward during the Great Famine long ago and only God knows how many died here brought too late for anything but a wash before they were buried." She also does not forget to mention "stories of cry and moan in the far reaches of the night". (McCourt 1996, p. 224)

Ireland in the early 20th century was a very poor country. The levels of poverty in many rural areas were exceptional by western standards. In 1930, the total population was sadly under three million. The great majority of the people were living in the countryside, or in country towns and villages. Dublin, the capital city, had a maximum population of about half a million people. (*Muckross Research Library, Ireland in the 1930's/40's*)

Life in Ireland in the 1930's was very diverse because of a strict social structure. On the one side, there was the upper class, which consisted of the Protestants and some English, who lived in Ireland. On the other side, there were the lower classes that were primarily the Irish. Most of the Irish people were Catholics. To sum it up, the Catholics lived in worse circumstances than the Protestants. Lots of Irish people lived in poverty, because they could not find any kind of work, and moreover, did not have a good education. Thus, many Irish people emigrated to America or England. Most of the Protestants were very wealthy, but even a few Catholics were affluent, too. The main work at that time was farming, so most of the wealthy people were landowners. They went to private schools, received a good education and could do any work they wanted. (Stopar 2005, p. 3)

¹ when he was talking to a girl in the next room

It goes without any saying that the McCourts, in the memoir, belong to the Catholics who lived in desperately bad conditions. Mr. McCourt has a perennial problem to find some job and is also looking for help from local farmers: "When he is not looking for work Dad goes for long walks, miles into the country. He asks farmers if they need any help [...] if they hire him he goes to work right away." (McCourt 1996, p. 102)

Other important historical facts about Ireland were their conflicts with England.

Ireland was not independent of England. In 1919 the parliament demanded independence from Great Britain. But the independence was not acknowledged and it followed an underground war between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Royal Irish Constabulary. (Chlump 2002, p. 4)

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, quite a few rebellions against the rule of British in Ireland took place. 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. 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 in Stopar 2005, p. 3).

In *Angela's Ashes* these conflicts are mentioned many times. Even in the first page Frank claims that Irish childhood is not comparable with any others. He defends this claim with many reasons and "the English and the terrible things that they did to us for eight hundred long years" is one of them. (McCourt 1996, p. 1)

3.2. Living Conditions in the First Half of the 20th Century in Comparison With the Memoir

3.2.1 Housing

Accommodation of the working class in Ireland was referred as "the worst slums in Europe" (Murphy 1984, p. 105). Many people were living in squalid tenements, without even the most basic facilities. Families lived in filthy single rooms of tenement houses, sharing a single water supply and a toilet in the rear yard (McManus 2003, p. 39). In 1911 nearly twenty six thousand families in Dublin lived in inner-city tenements, and twenty one thousand of these

families lived in just one room (*The National Archives of Ireland*, Poverty and Health). And the situation was getting worse - in 1938 one hundred and eleven thousand nine hundred fifty people lived in 6307 tenements, half of them estimated to be irreparably unfit for habitation (*BBC Northern Ireland*, Crying for a Happier Life). According to O'Brian (1982, p. 135) in Dublin in 1914 there were 5322 tenement houses and in 1161 of them there were living more than 20 people per house, provided with just with one toilet. The worst case was two toilets for 107 inhabitants.

The same is so in the memoir, where Frank has to experience sharing one room with the whole family and even a toilet with the whole lane. The reader might be genuinely shocked when McCourt describes his mother asking a stranger why he was emptying their bucket in their lavatory. The stranger replies:

Your lavatory, missus? Ah, no. You're making a bit of a mistake there, ha, ha. This is not your lavatory. Sure, isn't this the lavatory for the whole lane. You'll see passing your door here the buckets of eleven families and I can tell you it gets very powerful here in the warm weather, very powerful altogether (Mccourt 1996, p. 99).

When Angela asks who cleans the lavatory the stranger laughs again and replies that this lavatory was not cleaned since the houses were built – in the time of Queen Victoria. Still, this house is somehow luxurious because it has more than one room and the rent is just six shillings a week (Mccourt 1996, p. 110). Later, when the McCourts go to the Town Hall to complain, they are advised to move. When Malachy objects that they cannot afford to move he is asked: "do you expect Limerick to start building lavatories in the houses that are falling down anyway, that will be demolished after war?" (Mccourt 1996, p. 242).

In 1925 construction had commenced on the main power station at Ardnacrusha, near Limerick. In 1927 the Electricity Supply Board was established. However, only about fifty per cent of the populations as a whole were connected to the network. Obviously the installation of electricity and the provision of a water supply on tap were to have a dramatic effect on the domestic scene. (*Muckross Research Library*, Ireland in the 1930's/40's)

Although Frank wishes so much, the McCourts never have electricity. Little Frankie speaks many times about radio and electric heating. For example, when the whole family persuades their father to go to England for a job, but Malachy resists. He would never go there and "help England win a war". "Every house in the lane has electricity and we're lucky when we have a candle." Even little Frankie does not understand why his father does not want to earn more money in order that they could have "electricity and wireless" (Mccourt 1996, p. 248).

Later, when his Grandma's next door neighbour, Mrs. Purcell, gets a radio from the government because she is "old and blind" Frank sits every Sunday under the Mrs. Purcell window and avidly listens to plays on the BBC or radio Eireann, the Irish station. There he can hear "plays by O'Casey, Shaw, Ibsen and Shakespeare himself, the best of all even if he is English". (McCourt 1996, p. 318)

Not just the lack of electricity but also the lack of water was another problem for the poor people in the 1930's. As has been suggested by O'Brian (1982, p. 136) when speaking about tenements, water was not on each floor and often was available only at the single common tap. It was relatively frequent that mothers washed their children in ornamental waters. Nevertheless, the government was not uncaring about this situation: a law concerning water closets was introduced: for every 12 persons one water closet had to be provided. The Public Health Department also enforced another "downright silly laws" such as requirements that every room keeper will "sweep the floor before 10 A.M." or "every window of every room, used as a sleeping room, will be kept open at least one hour twice a day." (O'Brian 1982, p. 136)

In the memoir Frank's family in Limerick has also just the single common tap for the whole house. They have to warm the water on the fire. Furthermore, it does not mean that they wash themselves regularly. The older children usually wash themselves just for some significant events such as, for example, their brother's funeral. One would expect that they wash properly their whole body but they wash just heads, feet and they clean their ears with "the corner of the towel they brought from America" (McCourt 1996, p. 90). A similar process takes place on Frank's First Communion day with the difference that his Grandmother does not bother to warm the water. "I took off the shirt and she pushed me into a tin tub of icy cold water. My grandma scrubbed me, my mother scrubbed me. I was raw, I was red." (McCourt 1996, p. 141-142)

It is additionally the weather that made the situation of the poor family very hard. With incessant rain and the rising river Shannon, the slum floods. And people emptying their buckets make it worse and there is a sickening stink in the kitchen. When this happens, the family withdraws to the upstairs room, which they call Italy because it is like going away on holiday to a warm foreign place like, for instance, Italy. They stay there the whole winter and they go back downstairs in the springtime. Because of the wetness they call downstairs Ireland (McCourt 1996, p. 104).

3.2.2 Health

"The most foul and disease-ridden city of the British Empire was Dublin" (McManus 2003, p. 39). In every aspect of mortality, Dublin held the unenviable record of being first among major towns of Britain and Ireland. "Indeed from Brussels to Berlin, from Rome to Stockholm, and from Philadelphia to Boston, the death rates in major cities rarely exceeded those in the Irish Capital." (O'Brian 1986, p. 21) Generally heart disease, pneumonia and cancer were the most common killers. Furthermore, the most feared disease, the main menace of children and adults was tuberculosis. Dr Noël Browne, later Minister for Health, remembered that his afflicted brother was "unwanted, crippled and unable to fend for himself or communicate his simplest needs, except to the family; he was unable to mix with his peers." It is impossible to imagine the humiliation and desperation of his life. In Belfast Anne Boyle recalled:

There were twenty-eight in my class at school and when I was about twenty-five, I would say that half of those girls were dead, mostly from tuberculosis. I remembered the sexton of Sacred Heart chapel, Paddy McKernan; all he had was four daughters, and those four daughters died within a couple of years. They were teenage girls (*BBC Northern Ireland, Crying for a Happier Life*).

From 1902, when tuberculosis begun to peak, it became the most important public hygiene question of the day. Over 1300 persons per year in Dublin were dying from its attack. The old habits common among Irish like placing a pocket-handkerchief beneath the knees at church was denounced as an abomination. The kissing of the bible was discontinued in favour of raising the hand. (O'Brian 1986, p. 113)

The most used indicator of health status is often the major causes of death in a society. Of course, the reasons of death were determined by social factors. "Overcrowding, malnutrition and general poverty kept death rates from disease alarmingly high" (*BBC Northern Ireland, Crying for a Happier Life*). In the lower classes causes of death were likely to be infectious diseases such as typhoid, malaria or measles. In the upper classes such causes of death were far less likely. Those people usually succumb to the "diseases of modernity" like cancer, stroke and heart disease (Tovey; Share 2003, p. 278).

In the last decades the great changes in cases of the dead might be seen. There was a big decline of infectious diseases but a huge increase of death from cancer and cardiovascular diseases like stroke and heart disease. According to Devlin (1977, pp. 14 and 20 in Tovey;

Share, 2003, p. 278) in 1947 just nine per cent of the population of Ireland died from cancer in the comparison to twenty four per cent in 1995.

These drops in numbers of dying people were connected to the quality and amount of food. A report entitled *Food, Health and Income in 1936* was published by John Boyd Orr. His figures indicated that "consumption of staple foods such as potatoes had not declined since 1914, whilst consumption of meat, butter, eggs and cheese had risen by fifty per cent. Additionally, consumption of vegetables had risen by sixty four percent and fresh fruit by eighty eight percent." (*Blacs Academy, Social conditions in Britain in the 1930's: Health*)

As it was previously suggested above, there was a clear link between health and social class. For men between 20 and 64, who belonged to upper occupational classes, the death rate was ten per cent below the national average. However, for man from lower classes the death rate was eleven per cent above. In Rowntree's study of York (the city with a sizable Irish population) in 1936 the death rate was 8.4 per 1000 for those from the upper and middle classes, and 13.5 per 1000 for those from classes below the poverty line (*Blacsacademy, Social conditions in Britain in the 1930's: Health*). In Dublin, one of "the most unhealthy cities of Ireland", Dr. Thomas Antisell, a member of the Royal Dublin Society, proved that in the average age of death in third-class districts of the city was under five years, while in first-class districts it did not exceed 30 (O'Brian 1982 , p. 20).

Moreover, the most incredible rates are suggested by figures of infant mortality rates "Nearly 25 per cent of babies died from disease and poor diet" (*Skool, Social Change in Twentieth Century Ireland*). Rowntree's study says that 54.6 children per 1000 died during the period 1936-38. (Tovey; Share 2003, p. 278) According to Delaney (2009, p. 5) the child mortality rate was the highest during the 1940's but since then it has dropped significantly (see Appendix A). The radical improvement can be noticed as well as from comparison with the previous century.

An investigation of 3000 poor families carried out in 1845 by Dr. Thomas Willis, a local medical officer, led him to conclude that 22 percent of children did not survive the first year of life, 52 percent died before their sixth year and only one-third of the working class as a whole survived beyond 20 years. [...] Dublin was unable to avoid statistical notoriety in the returns of infant mortality. There the annual average rate in the last quarter of the century was 171 deaths in the first year of life for every 1000 children born. Even as late as 1898 the rate ran as high as 196 per 1000. (O'Brian 1986, p. 20 - 21)

A government survey in the 1930's reported that 60 per cent of Dublin mothers were unable to breastfeed because they were so undernourished. In Belfast Anne Boyle recalled: "There was so much infant mortality that it seemed as if every week blue baby coffins were coming out of every street. I had three brothers and a sister dead before they were two years old, out of eleven of us." At Stormont Professor R. J. Johnstone told: "Maternity is a more dangerous occupation in Northern Ireland than in the Free State or in England." He was right: maternal mortality in Northern Ireland actually rose by one fifth between 1922 and 1938 (*BBC Northern Ireland, Crying for a Happier Life*).

The same is so in *Angela's Ashes*, the factor of death is shown even on the first pages. The book starts with death of little Margaret - the fourth child that is born, the only girl, the loving, dreamt-of girl. The situation after her death is getting even worse than ever before. Frankie's mum falls into a great depression and his father starts to drink again. Angela cannot stand the flat, the neighbourhood or even America anymore because she sees the dead baby everywhere.

The cousins save money and arrange for the McCourts to return to Ireland. However, it is right there that a downward spiral into alcohol and poverty gets much worse. Because of the poor living condition one of the twins dies, later followed by his brother. Just four from seven of Angela's children survive. Even Frank himself almost dies. At the age of ten he falls ill with typhoid fever and, near death, he must be hospitalised. Typhoid is an illness which is spread through poor hygiene habits. As suggested above, the McCourts' living conditions did not allow good hygiene.

Not only do the McCourts have to bear the stink from the lavatories, but they also have to live with the flies and rats, that are connected with the dirty streets of Limerick. "Day and night we're tormented in the kitchen with people emptying their buckets. [...] It is bad enough in the winter when everything flows over and seeps under our door but worse in the warm weather when there are flies and bluebottles and rat" (McCourt 1996, p. 239).

The flies are nearly as bad as the rats. On warm days they swarm to the stable and when a bucket is emptied they swarm to the lavatory. If mum cooks anything they swarm into the kitchen and Dad says it's disgusting to think the fly sitting there on the sugar bowl was on the toilet bowl, or what's left of it, a minute ago [...] By day you have flies, by night you have the fleas. Mam says there's one good thing about fleas, they're clean, but flies are filthy, you never know where they came from and they carry diseases galore. (McCourt 1996, p. 241)

3.2.3. Food

"As might be expected, the diet of the people left much to be desired." The menu was constantly the same: bread, black tea and usually also porter. "Cheap bacon, odd scraps of beef or fish supplemented with vegetable, invariably confined to potatoes and cabbage"; these were the staple items in food of poor families when the breadwinner had no employment. Among the very poor pig head was a typical food as there were no potatoes. Even butter was not available for these families. (O'Brian 1982, p. 164) For those who can afford it cheese and eggs were on the list of the daily diet. For almost all families marmalade or jam was a luxury. Milk was rare on the menu of the poor and if they have it in the household it was always given to children. Nonetheless, milk caused serious trouble when it was not sterilized. (O'Brian 1982, p. 165 - 166)

People remembered seeing barefoot children waiting at the Albert Bridge pens in Belfast to get unwanted, unsterilized milk from cows about to be shipped to England. The vigorous efforts, unfortunately not always successful, to ensure the pasteurisation of milk in Belfast were not mirrored in Dublin. There the report of a government committee proved that the Dublin slums were crammed with children disabled as a result of drinking contaminated milk (*BBC Northern Ireland, Crying for a Happier Life*).

Dr. Robert Collis, a Dublin paediatrician, estimated that about 40 000 people in Dublin were attempting to feed themselves on sixpence a day. He had grown tired of giving medicine to poor children who really needed food (*BBC Northern Ireland, Crying for a Happier Life*). Food of the whole family depended on the amount of weekly wages. (O'Brian 1982, p. 164 - 165)

Food and other necessities were brought from day to day in small quantities, which made a purchase for coal, for example, which was more costly. Coal was the main fuel, an open grate providing not only heat but in most cases also the only means of preparing food. (O'Brian 1982, p. 167)

In comparison with the memoir, the diet of the McCourts was not as balanced as it may seem from historical facts. The Christmas menu on the McCourts' table consists of sheep's head, cabbage, floury white potatoes, and a bottle of cider but just because it is Christmas. For this extensive menu the McCourts can give thanks to St. Vincent de Paul Society and the food voucher from them (McCourt 1996, p. 313). If it was not Christmas McCourt would probably have just tea and bread or no dinner at all.

The lack of food makes Frank steal a loaf of bread from a van outside a shop, lemonade from a van outside a pub (McCourt 1996, p. 270) or even a whole box of food outside the door of one of the big houses in the rich neighbourhood. There is a bottle of milk, a loaf of bread, cheese, tomatoes, and "oh, God, a jar of marmalade." He just takes the box and pretends to be a messenger boy making a delivery. "Malachy and Michael are beside themselves when they see what's in the box and they're soon gobbling thick curs of bread slathered with golden marmalade." (McCourts 1996, p. 272 - 273)

At the beginning of the 20th century Ireland was full of starving children and the educational system itself did not help much. Children had just a half-hour break and they have to spend it within the precincts of the school, whereas for instance in England children were allowed to go home for a meal during a one-hour break. Though the Irish children had to spend the break in their schools, there was no provision of food whatsoever. So much so that the poorer children were obliged to bring in scraps of bread or in some cases arrived with no food at all. Teachers often stated that "some boys were so weak from hunger even to play during recreation." (O'Brian 1982, p. 177)

In the book it was not just in school, that the McCourts' children were starving, it was also at home. As they were starving half of the time, Frank very often dreamed about food.

When Dad brings home the first week's wages on a Friday night we know the weekend will be wonderful. [...] on nights like that we can drift off to sleep knowing there will be a breakfast of eggs, fried tomatoes and fright bred, tea with lashings of sugar and milk and, later in the day a bid dinner with mashed potatoes, peas and ham, a trifle Mam makes, layers of fruit and warm delicious custard on a cake soaked in sherry. (McCourt 1996, p. 16)

Unfortunately, Frank's dream does not come true because his father always drinks all his wages.

3.3. Poverty

Poverty is closely connected with the previous issues. The high percentage of the population of Ireland was living in appalling conditions. However, Irish people lived on the line of poverty even when they emigrated. For example Rowntree's survey of poverty in 1899 in York (the city with a sizable Irish population) proved that "28 per cent of the population there was lacking the minimum necessities of life" (O'Brian 1982, p. 162) The breadwinners must

have been remarkably temperate, for the amount of money left after expenditures for food, rent, fuel and clothing left just a little. (O'Brian 1982, p. 168)

The main reasons for the mass poverty in Ireland were generally unemployment, low wages and intemperance. As has been suggested by O'Brian (1982, p. 163) many cases of bad living conditions were also caused by "voluntary poverty" induced by profligate habits and, most of all, drinking. No wonder they drink when they have to live in such conditions described above.

Among the most abject conditions were those people who were occupying the one-room testament. Families of five or more persons were squashed into one room with almost no equipment. "Often only with straw covering on the floor for sleeping, no furniture, neither fuel or heat, not much more than a few plates, bowl, pan and kettle with which to prepare and serve food, and bucket secreted in the closet for the relief of normal bodily functions" (O'Brian 1982, p. 164).

Similar conditions are described in the book. Although the McCourts have a regular bed, they have to share it, and moreover, it is full of fleas. They also use a bucket, sometimes called a chamber pot. Frank is very surprised when he sees a bucket, which is also shared, for the first time in Ireland – they did not have anything like that in America from where they just have come. (McCourt 1996, p. 46) Later when they are forced to move in with Angela's cousin Laman Griffin it is the Frank's job to empty Laman's chamber pot, which Frank finds very disgusting and vomits every time. Furthermore, it is because of the pot as well, that Frank is compelled to leave his family and move in with his uncle where he almost starves. (McCourt 1996, p. 342)

It is somehow understandable that these poor people did everything in order to survive. As might be expected, "landlords were not surprised to find floorboard and banisters pulled up and used for firewood or lead and cooper pipe fittings cut away to realize a few pence to pay the rent and buy food or, as the landlord would rather claim, to spend on drink" (O'Brian 1982, p. 164.)

A similar situation is described in *Angela's Ashes* when the McCourts burn their wall for fuel. When the land lord's agent comes to the flat to ask Mrs. McCourt for rent, which was already four weeks behind, he finds out that instead of two rooms, that he rented them, there is just one and one wall is missing. Even though Frank, his grandma and mother pretend that they do

not remember any wall, he finds out. "I want to know where that wall is and what ye did with the room, so I do. Mum turns to us. Do any of ye remember the wall? Michael pulls at her hand. Is that the wall we burned in the fire?" This is the story of how it came to pass that the McCourts were evicted from their lodgings and were forced to move in with Angela's cousin Laman Griffin. (McCourt 1996, p. 322)

It happens very often in the book that Angela has to beg in order to feed or dress her children. But Malachy in this case plays "Mr. Grand Manner" and is too proud to beg anyone for anything. They often settle a quarrel over this issue. When boys' shoes are falling to pieces Angela unsuccessfully begs for new ones. Malachy instead fixes their old shoes with an old bicycle tire and nails in order to avoid begging. Of course, the boys do not want to wear the shoes anymore "because the tire pieces are so lumpy we stumble when we walk" (McCourt 1996, p. 115). They are so ashamed of their shoes that they even do not want to go to school so they pretend to be sick. But no excuses help them and they are said to be grateful to have any shoes at all, there are boys who go to school barefoot even on bitter days; there are seven boys without shoes in humble Frank's class. (McCourt 1996, p. 115 - 116)

One of the most visible things of poverty in Ireland was the horde of ragged children trooping the streets in all weathers, barefoot and insufficiently dressed (O'Brian 1982, p. 173). Almost any photograph of the streets of Dublin or any other city offers evidence of their neglected appearance (see Appendix B). For poor families new clothes were "something of a rarity". Female fashion was reduced to having old coats dyed and dresses made up by the neighbour who was handy with a needle. (O'Brian 1982, p. 168)

New clothes are "something of a rarity" as well for the McCourts in the memoir. Despite Angela's sons are "going around with broken shoes and their arses hanging out of their trousers" (McCourt 1996, p. 248) she is wearing a "fine red American coat", which she got from her cousin in Brooklyn. But it is because of this coat, that she almost lost a docket in the St. Vincent de Paul Society. But finally she manages to persuade "three men at the table asking questions" that she really comes from a poor family with four children and husband who has no work. Finally she gets a docket to get a week's groceries including tea, sugar, flour, milk, butter and a separate docket for a bag of coal. Of course she "won't be getting this every week" the three men "will be visiting the house to see if there's a real need" (McCourt 1996, p. 66 - 67).

For many families material relief could come only by way of public or private charity. Free coal was distributed to families devastated by unemployment or illness. Just in Dublin the annual subscription for this purpose was £500, and ensured that at least 8000 or so bags of coal were available for delivery to the poor during the Christmas season. The St. Vincent de Paul Society was the largest lay Catholic charitable agency of all Ireland. In Dublin alone it had over 30 branches distributing relief to some 5000 families. The charities aid the poor providing not just coal but also furniture, clothes, and food. (O'Brian 1982, p. 169)

In the book *Angela* does not rely just on the St. Vincent de Paul Society or the Dispensary. When Frankie finds her begging for any food left over from the priests' dinner it is really shocking for him.

This is my own mother, begging. This is worse than the dole, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Dispensary. It's the worst kind of shame, almost as bad as begging on the streets where the tinkers hold up their scabby children. Give us a penny for the poor child, mister, the poor child is hungry, missus. She is a beggar now and if anyone from the lane or my school sees her, the family will be disgraced entirely (McCourt 1996, p. 288).

It seems that Frankie forgets that he is also a beggar in situations when his mother is ill and cannot get out of the bed. He, Malachy and Michel go from house to house asking for turf, coal and wood and they use "Alphie's pram to carry the load" but they also take Alphie with them because "he is small and he smiles" and people see him and should have felt sorry for him and them. However, they are not successful by this way and they become thieves again. They go around the backs of the houses and climb over the walls and take what they wanted until they cannot dig Alphie out from under the load of coal and turf. Meanwhile Michael is ringing the front doorbells to keep maids busy. (McCourt 1996, p. 274)

On a daily basis the streets were full of trading boys and girls. According to police records from 1902, 433 boys and 180 girls were engaged in street trading in Dublin. "No one believed, however, that this was an accurate count of the numbers involved, which certainly exceeded 1,000 children." A representative of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children stated:

I saw that a child was sitting on the steps of a house crying and shivering with the cold. She had a number of boxes of matches in her hands. She was barefoot, and badly dressed, with an old cape about her shoulders. [...] I took her in a cab to the South Dublin Union. [...] The child stated to me that the mother gave her a penny in the evening and told her to go and buy matches and sell them. She further said she was out selling matches on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays, and on Saturday nights she was

out selling bootlaces. The child was nine years of age. [...] Only last month the same child was again seen selling matches in the street (O'Brian 1986, p. 176)

He added that they were endeavouring to get the child into an Industrial School. Such traders, generally ranged in age from 10 to 15 years, and mostly came from the poorest of working-class homes. (O'Brian 1986, p. 176)

This is a bit different in the memoir. Frank does not work as a trader, but is also compelled to work from a very early age. He is only eleven years of age when he starts delivering coal on the float with Mr. Hannon. And it is "the best day of his life" when he takes the reins and dozens of his schoolmates are committing "the deadly sin of envy". (McCourt 1996, p. 305) Work makes Frank happy and gives him feelings that he had never felt before.

On the way home I see myself in the glass of a shop window all black from the coal, and I feel like a man, a man with a shilling in his pocket, a man who has a lemonade in a pub with two coal men and a lime man. I'm not a child anymore and I could easily leave Leamy's School forever. I could work with mister Hannon every day and when his legs got too bad I could take over the flat and deliver coal to rich people the rest of my life and my mother wouldn't have to be a beggar (McCourt 1996, p. 301 – 302).

3.4. Unemployment

In the interview named *From a Slum to the Savoy* Louise Tucker mentioned that it was very interesting to her that there had not been any expectation that McCourts' mother would have worked. Frank McCourt replied:

People have said that to me, "why didn't she work?" Where? How? There was no work. My Grandmother was a charwoman. She scrubbed floors and worked very hard but she had two safe jobs. Otherwise, there was nothing. My mother, shabby, with no clothes or shoes, she wasn't going to go down and get a job at Woolworth behind the cosmetics counter or any other counter. She couldn't do it. They wanted younger people and they could pick and choose whoever they wanted. (Tucker 2005, p. 10 in McCourt 1996)

McCourt adds that it is very difficult to understand this now when Irish people "are recruiting from all over Eastern Europe". The world depression of the 1930's caused destitution everywhere and, by western European standards, Ireland was hit hard. According to *BBC Northern Ireland* in the Irish Free State the numbers on the unemployment register reached 145000 in 1936. In Northern Ireland 101967 had no work in July 1935 and in February 1938 29.5 per cent of insured industrial workers were unemployed.

For women in the 1930's it was much more difficult to find an occupation than for the men and the government did not help much. They sought to protect male employment when new opportunities for women and men were opening up in manufacturing in the 1930's. The Conditions of Employment Act in 1935 gave the Minister for Industry and Commerce the right to limit the number of women working in any industry (*Scoilnet*, Discovering Women in Irish History: Employment). As addition to that, legislative measures targeting working wives were introduced in 1933; it became law for national school teachers to resign on marriage, and the 1935 Employment Act extended the marriage bar to all civil service posts (*University College Cork*, Ireland: society & economy 1912-49). Due to Regional Industrial Plans of Industrial Development Authority (IDA), regions that had lost population since the 1850's began to experience population growth in the 1970's through regional emigration or return migration. That brought success for industrialization for the Irish countryside but left bigger cities like Dublin, Limerick or Cork in "serious difficulty in relation to manufacturing employment" (Tovey; Share 2003, p. 67)

This had the result in the 1970's for women's employment in manufacturing outside Dublin, Limerick, Cord and Waterford to increase by 139 per cent whilst it decreased by 35 per cent in those rural areas. The figures for working women, increased despite the fact that IDA stressed that "jobs in the new factories were for adult males" but it was women, particularly rural women, who did this jobs. (Tovey, Share 2003, p. 68)

As is known, in Northern Ireland the economic situation, including unemployment, was much worse than in the Republic of Ireland or the whole of Britain. In Appendix C the comparison of unemployment in Northern Ireland is shown. For instance, unemployment in 1930 in Northern Ireland was 24.3 whereas in Britain it was only 15.8. Unemployment in Northern Ireland was increasing from 24.3 in 1930 to 28.0 in 1938 in contrast with Britain where unemployment was reduced from 15.8 in 1930 to 12.8 in 1938. As England was in the war there were more working opportunities which explain massive emigration from Ireland to England. (Hill; Linch 2011, p. 5)

The emigration for jobs from Ireland to England is also shown in *Angela's Ashes*. Not just Malachy but many other men went to England during the war to get jobs.

There are many other families in the streets. The going-away fathers walk ahead; the mothers carry babies [...]. In the pubs around the railway station the men are packed in drinking the money the agents gave them for travel food. They're having the last pint, the last drop of whiskey on Irish soil. (McCourt 1996, p. 250)

3.5. Alcoholism

"There has been much debate over whether, statistically speaking, Ireland is a heavy-drinking country or not, the evidence points to a long history of alcohol consumption and to its central place within the culture." (Tovey; Share 2003, p. 371) Without any doubt drinking has been, is and will be an important aspect of Irish everyday life. Ireland's ranks in terms of proportion in national income spent on alcohol and admissions to hospital were the highest during the period from 1864 till 1919. (Blaney 1974, p. 112) "Only a generation earlier the number of arrests for drunkenness in Dublin was exceeded by over five times the annual rate recorded after 1904." (O'Brian 1982, p. 163) Even in the United States and Britain the Irish had the highest rate of alcoholism of any ethnic group. (Blaney 1974, p. 108 - 109) Since 1919 the fall of the rates was recorded; for instance, the death rate from cirrhosis of the liver, a disease closely associated with alcoholism, in 1908 fell from twenty per cent to four per cent in 1972. (Blaney 1974, p. 112)

There were many theories of causes concerning possible reasons of Irish alcoholism such as environmental causes, socio-cultural theories or economic factors. By environmental causes is meant for example Irish weather and climate or poor food, by socio-cultural theories lack of places where people could go and entertain themselves and by economic factors the fact that alcohol in those days was relatively cheap and available (Blaney 1974, p. 109 - 111). As Watson suggests (2002, p.190 in Tovey; Share 2003, p. 371) "public drinking houses" were important sites of social, political and economic exchange in almost every society. According to Tovey and Share (2003, p. 371) there were 21000 pubs in 1838 in Ireland and 17300 in 1896. Compared to 8750 pubs in 2002 it is a very high figure. A pub was described by an "observation team in 1934 as the only type of building used by a large number of ordinary people where their thoughts and actions are arranged for them." (Tovey; Share 2003, p. 374)

As Malachy McCourts, Frank's father, spends most of his wages on alcohol, alcoholism is one of the major themes in *Angela's Ashes*. It happens very often that Malachy comes home in the middle of the night and wakes his "troops", his "four warriors" and he wants them to promise to die for Ireland.

Angela tries as much as she can in order to get money from Malachy's wages to fill her children's bellies with food and inhibit her husband from filling his belly with whiskey. One day she even goes to his work to ask if she could get some of Malachy's wages so he would

not spend it in a bar. But she gets a negative answer: "I am sorry lady, but if we did that we'd have half the wives storming the place. Lotta men have the drinking problem but there's nothing we can do long as they show up sober and do their work" (McCourt 1996, p. 19). However, Malachy often does not go to work sober, or he does not show up at all and the circle of losing his job continues. His pint is often more important than his children.

When Alphie is born "Grandpa in the North" sends a telegram money order for five pounds. As Angela cannot go far from the bed after delivery, Malachy goes to cash it. Despite the fact that Angela sends his two sons with him, he goes straight to the pub, sending the boys home to tell their mum he will be there in a minute. Angela sends Frank and Malachy junior back to the pub to tell everyone that their father is drinking the money for the baby.

However, their father is not in the same pub anymore and they do not have any chance of finding him among such a large number of pubs. As could be expected their father is home when the pubs close, singing and offering his boys a penny to die for Ireland. "It is bad enough to drink the dole or the wages but the man that drinks the money for a new baby is gone beyond the beyond." (McCourt 1996, p. 206 - 210) Even on the day of his son Eugene's funeral he cannot deny of his pint.

Dad is sitting at the back of the pub with a man who has a dirty face and hair growing out of his nose. They're not talking but staring straight ahead and their black pints are resting on a small white coffin on the seat between them. I know that's Eugene's coffin because I had one like it and I want to cry when I see the black pints on top of it. (McCourt 1996, p. 92)

Despite all the difficulties that Malachy caused to his family by his drinking His sons still love him. Frank looks up to his father with tremendous admiration.

I think my father is like the holy Trinity with three people with him. The one in the morning with the paper, the one at night with the stories and the prayers, and then the one who does the bad things and comes home with the smell of whisky and wants us to die for Ireland. (McCourt 1996, p. 239)

4. *Angela's Ashes* in Irish-American literature

Angela's Ashes falls into the category of Irish-American literature for a variety of reasons. Frank McCourt indirectly describes his Irish-American identity in his memoir. For another reason, *Angela's Ashes* carries a lot of both Irish and American cultures. For the Irish part, the author uses the dialect and jargon so that the reader is almost able to hear the Irish lilt and he

"brilliantly brings the Irish storytelling gift into his narration so it penetrates the whole memoir." (Zavadilova 2011, p. 63)

Ireland's literary tradition is recognized worldwide as being enviably wealthy. The same may be said about Irish-American literature, although it is not so varied because Irish-American literature tends to share a very similar blueprint. The authors depict their deprived childhood far from perfect family life and set their popular genre: a memoir. There are many writers who describe some difficult parts of his or her life they had to overcome. Writers like Mary Anne Madden Sadlier, who penned *The Irish Girl in America*, Mark McCrum - the author of *The Craic* or Timothy O'Grady, the author of *I Could Read the Sky* could be named as the famous Irish-American writers for their memoirs. These memoirs use the charm of immediate family history, the silent suffering of a child watching an alcoholic father destroying the family happiness, a mother's assurance that their faith will help to get over any problem. (Harrington 2001, p. 59)

Angela's Ashes has the same motives like memoirs mentioned above but at the same time it differs from other moaning memoirs in many aspects. One of the aspects is the style of the narration. As will be discussed in following chapters, McCourt uses many narrating techniques such as "child technique, adult voice technique or omniscient narrator techniques". Related to narrating techniques are linguistic structures - as the child narrator McCourt uses much simpler linguistic structure and vocabulary than as the adult narrator who uses much more advanced vocabulary or linguistic structures. (Forbes 2007, p. 473 - 490)

Another aspect that marks out *Angela's Ashes* from the majority of other Irish-American memoirs is America itself. Most of Irish-American memoirs are focused on the harsh living conditions in Ireland and the complicated immigration to America. Frank McCourt, on the other hand, chooses to show the contrast the other way round. He starts with depicting the process of assimilation in New York followed by migration to the hometown of his Mother - Limerick. (Jones; Sawhill 1997, p. 25)

4.1. The American Dream

Many of people attempting to make a living in Ireland gave up the struggle, and they voted with their feet by leaving the island altogether. For more than three centuries Irish men and women crossed the Atlantic Ocean to make a new home in America. The largest wave of

immigration was during the Potato Famine and lasted five years – from 1845 to 1850 (Almedia 2001, p. 2). According to *The History Chanel* almost half of America's immigrants in the 1940's came from Ireland. Between 1820 and 1930, 4.5 million Irish migrated to the United States. In the twentieth century immigration was slowed by depression, World War II and immigration legislation. After 1945 immigration rose again, and "while the number of Irish who entered the United States between 1945 and 1960 was just under half the number who arrived in the 1920's it was still significant." (Almedia 2001, p. 4).

America in the Frank McCourt's books is seen as a land of opportunity (1996, p. 238), as a land where people are "bedecked in gliterin' jewelry" (1996, p. 143), they "fiddle with their food and leave something on their plate and then push the plate away" (1999, p. 60), and they have "nothing else to do but sing and dance" (1996, p. 367). Everyone there has "big white smile" (1996, p.153) and "fat arses [...] in trousers too tight and colours you'd never see in Ireland, blues, pinks, light greens and even flashes of puce" (1999, p.61).

However, the United States of America was not as perfect as the Irish people imagined it to be. Later the immigrants faced the question of whether life in the United States was really better than the one in Ireland. Rowntree's survey of poverty in 1899 in York proved that "28 per cent of the population there was lacking the minimum necessities of life" (O'Brian 1982, p. 162).

It may seem inconceivable to the reader that despite the fact that Frank McCourt experienced the horrors of slum life in New York City, his vision of America remains "clichéd and idealistic". (ÉIGEARTAIGH 2005, p. 85) "You can do everything in America, it's the land of opportunity. America is not like Limerick, a grey place with a river that kills." (McCourts 1996, p. 238) It seems that Frank entirely forgets his father's words when they come back from America to Ireland: "Things are terrible in America"

At the beginning of *Angela's Ashes* McCourt, as an adult narrator, states: "My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born." (1996, p. 1). However, the experience of the McCourts' family in Brooklyn, described in the first pages of the book, is not significantly different from their experience in Limerick. It is the Great Depression; no jobs, no money and lack of food. (Robinson 2000, p. 10)

As the child narrator, McCourt was determined to save some money and go back to the United States of America.

I start to think about America and how I have to save money for my fare instead of squandering it on fish and chips and tea and buns. I will have to save a few shillings from my pound because if I don't I will be in Limerick forever. I am fourteen now and I will save something every week. Surely I should be able to go to America by the time I am twenty. (Mccourt 1996, p. 134)

Furthermore, Angela and Malachy allow themselves to forget the horrors of American slums, and they continue to regard America as a land of dreams and opportunities for their sons. Angela dreams about going back to the birth place of her sons: "Some day we will go back to America and we will have a nice warm place to live and a lavatory down the hall like the one in Classon Avenue not this filthy thing outside our door." (Mccourt 1996, p. 121)

Nonetheless, McCourt does, of course, find out that all these clichés about America are entirely misleading. (ÉIGEARTAIGH 2005, p. 86) In *'Tis*, the second volume of his memoir, he states: "New York was the city of my dreams and now I am here the dreams are gone, and it's not what I expected at all" (Mccourt 1999, p. 58). In addition, he cannot shatter the American dream of his family so that he cannot share his disillusionment with them. "How could I ever write my mother or anyone in Limerick and tell them the way I'm living in this rich land with two dollars to last me for a week [...]. They'd never believe me." (Mccourt 1999, p. 60) Even as an adult McCourt does not know where he belongs and which identity he represents:

I would like to be Irish when it's time to a song or a poem. I would like to be American when I teach. I would like to be Iris-American or American-Irish though I know I can't be two things even if Scot Fitzgerald said the sign of intelligence is the ability to carry opposed thoughts in the same time. I don't know what I would like to be. (Mccourt 1999, p. 360 - 361)

4.2. Authorship

Although Frank McCourt received international acclaim, he was bitterly criticized by the local people of Limerick and its surroundings. His critics said that the writer exaggerated the stories of poverty and hardship in Limerick, and some of them even claimed that the book was strongly anti-Limerick and anti-Catholic (*Limerick City Council. Angela's Ashes Flare up in City Controversy*).

According to *the Limerick Leader*, the famous local newspaper, there is a quite large amount of people who remember the lanes of Limerick in the 1930's and 1940's and claim that it was not the way that McCourt describes it. "I don't believe that poverty ever existed," said Edie Morrissey, who grew up in Joseph Street and asserts that he knew Frank's three brothers Malachy, Alphie and Michael. "But the fact that his father was a chronic alcoholic might have caused some of his problems." Alt John Gilligan, who was several years younger than Frank McCourt, admitted he said that he did not remember his early days on Windmill Street. He also claims that Limerick did not suffer from the abject poverty as it is depicted in *Angela's Ashes*. "Things were relatively good. Everyone was in the same situation. Most of that site of Limerick was fed by offal, packet and tripe, and rabbit. With half of crown you'd feed half the road. There was abundance of cheap, good food." Another Limerickian dismissed the fact that McCourt's father would be discriminated against because of his Northern origin. "There were a lot of work on the docks and family lived reasonably well." He adds that the Frank McCourt's story has nothing to do with Limerick, but his father who every time had some money spent it on alcohol (*Limerick City Council. Angela's Ashes Flare up in City Controversy*).

Even Angela McCourt had challenged her son's recollections before her death in 1981. Frank and his brother Malachy persuaded her to attend *A Couple of Blackguards*, their memoir, in a Manhattan theatre. Angela interrupted the tearful renditions of their childhood, standing up and shouting at the stage: "It didn't happen that way. It's all a pack of lies." (*The Telegraph: Frank McCourt*)

After the publication of *Angela's Ashes*, the local newspaper, the *Limerick Leader*, published a photograph showing the youthful McCourt and his younger brother Malachy, smiling and smartly dressed in their scout uniforms - and not just of any scout uniforms, but those of the St Joseph's Boy Scouts, the elite of Limerick. Moreover, another picture showed their mother Angela, whose plump figure would appear to belie McCourt's claims of his family having suffered constant hunger.

It seems that many locals hold a similar opinion. Paddy Malone, the boy who appears in the photograph on one of the book's covers, is among McCourt's most furious detractors. He, too, grew up in the lanes of Limerick and went to the same school as McCourt. "I know nothing about literature, but I do know the difference between fact and fiction, McCourt calls this

book a memoir, but it is filled with lies and exaggerations. The McCourts were never that poor." (*Dailymail* 2009)

Margaret O'Brian Steinfels in her article *I Knew Angela. Did Frank McCourt?* From 1997 raises the question about the personality of Frank's mother. Mrs. McCourt, as Angela was called in Steinfels' household, used to babysit Steinfels as a child and according to her Mrs. McCourt was "formidable woman wreathed in a cloud of cigarette smoke" whereas the Angela known by readers of *Angela's Ashes* is as "a victim of her children and a feckless man who spends his pay on drink."

Limerick locals counted a total of "117 lies or inaccuracies" in the 426-page book. All of McCourt's critics claim that he altered the facts or at least exaggerated. Furthermore, some facts really play into the hands of Frank McCourt's critics. In several places of the memoir the writer changes the "voice" of performative identity of narration from "child narrator" to "adult narrator" or "third person narrator" which never increases the reader's trust. (Forbes 2007, p. 488) As it is shown in following example, in some cases author could not know some information firsthand:

At Philomena's house the sisters and their husbands ate and drank while Angela sat in a corner nursing the baby and crying. Philomena stuffed her mouth with bread and ham and rumbled at Angela. That's what you get for being such a fool. [...] You have nobody to blame but yourself. If I was you, said Philomena, I'd made sure there's no more children. He don't have an' job, so he don't, an' never will. So [...] no more children, Angela. Are you listenin' to me? I am, Philomena. (Mccourt 1996, s. 10 - 11)

The baby that Angela is nursing in the corner is Frank. Forbes (2007, p. 487) suggests that it is more than obvious that he cannot be narrating from his firsthand memory but lets the third-person narrator tell the story; the text then could seem more fictive than a memoir or autobiography. The memoir assumes fiction-like qualities when the author breaks the narratives in order to insert the letter from Angela's cousin:

Dear Aunt Margaret,
I take pen in hand to write you this letter and hope this finds you as it leaves us in the best of health. My husband Tommy is in fine form working away and Delia's husband Jimmy is in fine form working away and we hope this finds you in fine form. I am sorry to tell you that Angela has not been the same since lying in the bed with her face to the wall. To make matters worser we think she's expecting again and that's too much altogether. [...] We all think that Angela and children would be better off in her native land. (Mccourt 1996, p. 42 - 43)

Forbes (2007, p. 488) adds it is highly unlikely that McCourt had access to this letter or even knew it was ever written, it was composed when he was just four years old. In this case "readers are aware that McCourt has fabricated parts of the memoir, which may explain why *Angela's Ashes* was at first alternately identified as fiction." In one of McCourt's readings, he stopped and told of going through his mother's things after she died. "She kept a sort of diary, and the very first thing she wrote in there was 'I must have been the most unfortunate creature God ever made'". This may be regarded as an explanation as to how he could have access to things like letters or conversation between his mother and others when he was a baby. (Jones; Sawhill 1997, p. 25)

By contrast, there are also some people who somehow sympathize with the description of living conditions in *Angela's Ashes*. "Times were rough and there was no employment here. Lots of city men went out to the country to work on farms and earn of few bob." Pat Dillon, who was just a few years older than Frank McCourt, dismissed the opinion of Mr. Morrissey. "The whole country was relaying on The St. Vincent De Paul at that time and St. Vincent De Paul had little to give them. Everyone at school was badly shod, or not to shod at all, and things were tough at home. Even our meals weren't certain." He also remembers Limerick in the way as Frank McCourt does. He recalls how they were looking for coal on the Docks roads, how they got clothes from their neighbours and their neighbours had got it from their neighbours. He describes everyone being mad to get the job delivering milk or papers, going to the country to help farmers. (*Limerick City Council*. Mixed Reactions Smoulder among the Embers of Angela's Ashes)

Frank McCourt reacted strongly to his criticism and sends a message: "They don't know how to read the book". To the claim that his book is anti-Catholic he rejects: "I am not trying to blame anyone not the church nor the government. If I would try to blame anyone it would be my father and his drinking." And He also does not accept the suggestion that he exaggerated in his story. He claims that these people did not see his family circumstances first-hand. (*Limerick City Council*. Frank Blasts at his Critics)

In the interview *From a Slum to the Savory* Frank McCourt was asked by Louse Tucker how he had remembered so many details about his childhood. Mr. McCourt describes how he was walking the streets of Limerick and he could remember things that happened when he was a little boy, delivering telegrams for two years. Subsequently he scribbled list of things, people,

priest and teachers, list of food – which was a very short list – and then he went on with the stories.

As well, a columnist in New York, Anne Quinlan, said that she did not understand how Frank McCourt could remember so many things from when he was ten or fourteen. But McCourt responded:

Well, her life was very different: she probably lived in a suburb of New York with a nice bedroom with white fluffy curtains at the window, a nice little bed, lots of books and magazines, the radio and television set. We didn't have any of that, there was nothing, we had uncluttered lives, completely uncluttered with materials things. Plenty going on otherwise, out in the streets, we were always out. That's the stuff that came back. (Tucker 1997 in McCourt 1996: p. 5)

In another interview, he defended himself by saying that he recorded everything in notebooks which he had been writing for more than forty years. The notebooks were full of things about Limerick, about his mother and father, snatches of conversation and so on. (Forbes 2007, p. 473)

McCourt further admits that he erred at least once. When he was autographing books in a bookstore in Limerick, a man approached and introduced himself as Willie Harrell, one of the boys who little Frankie McCourt grew up with. "In your book you give me a sister, and Frankie, I had no sister." McCourt shakes his head. "This was true. Somehow or other, I invented a sister for him who had none." (Jones; Sawhill 1997, p. 26)

4.2. Genre

The book *Angela's Ashes* "was at first alternately identified as fiction and as autobiography, but by the time of publication, it had settled down as a memoir" (Foster 2004, p. 167).

However, *Angela's Ashes* is a memoir which is kind of autobiography but there is a slight difference between these two terms. As a literary agent - Agent Kristin Nelson of the *Pub Rants* blog explains a memoir is a story which is told through the significant events of one particular life experience, and it usually focuses on a finite period of time and not the person's life as a whole. In a memoir scenes are built on one another to reach a "pivotal moment." On the other hand "an autobiography has remembrances of important events throughout the author's life and how it unfolded from that person's unique, inside perspective." (*Pub Rants*, Writing a Memoir Is Not the Same as Writing My Memoirs)

As suggested by the word, memoir is based on memories and according to another literary agent Barbary Doyen "memories are faulty, so a little leeway is given to authors of memoirs, but they are expected to be honest and to check their facts for accuracy." (*Barbara Doyen: Literary Agent, What is a Memoir? What Makes a Memoir Different from an Autobiography or Biography?*) It is impossible to say that "the way one remembers something is not the way another remembers something." In other words, nobody can blame Frank McCourt for remembering his childhood incorrectly. What also makes a memoir a memoir is subjectivity, whereas objectivity is connected with autobiography. If McCourt would title his book: *Angela's Ashes: Autobiography* then the criticism would be justified. (Forbes 2007, p. 474)

In deciding to call the text a memoir then, McCourt claims to be doing no more than providing readers with an account of his memory, and he therefore establishes the truth of his Irish experience for his audience immediately, right on the cover of his text. (Forbes 2007, p. 474)

As Forbes (2004, p. 173) notes it does not matter whether fiction, autobiography or memoir, reliable or not, "'Tis, five hundred copies were of that lacklustre shifting in Limerick alone, along with hundreds paperbacks of its predecessor." And it, of course, has meant a tourists bonanza in Limerick. It is being estimated that in the period from 1977 to 2004 approximately 3,000 visitors were guided, at three or four pounds a head, around "the supposed site of McCourt's long-demolished hell-hole." People are attracted there by McCourt's Dickensian's description, and then they find out that everything has changed for the better. "That may not be what they expected, or wanted, but it is good for business." The local Tourism Development Manager admits.

5. Conclusion

The overall aim of this thesis has been to identify and examine the ways of how Frank McCourt describes living conditions in *Angela's Ashes*, compare it with the general living conditions of Ireland in the first half of the 20th century and depict it from various points of view.

The first chapter introduced Frank McCourt, his biography and seminal works along with the summary of the most successful one – *Angela's Ashes*. This memoir won many prestigious awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Biography and the Los Angeles Times Book Award.

In the following section living conditions in the first half of the 20th century were analysed. One of the studied aspects was housing. Accommodation of the working class in Ireland was referred as the worst slums of all Europe. Many people were living in squalid tenements, without even the most basic facilities; usually with a shared toilet. Slums and tenements were commonly without electricity, and a number of times, water was available only at the single common tap for the whole tenement. It was not unusual that inhabitants of these tenements lived along with rats, fleas or lice.

Housing conditions are described in *Angela's Ashes* in the same way. The McCourts' house floods and they are forced to move upstairs. They imagine that they are going on their holiday to a warm foreign place like Italy. That is why their upstairs, where they spend every winter, is called Italy. They call downstairs Ireland and stay there just during the springs and summers. They share the toilet with the whole lane; they live along with rats, fleas, and from time to time, even with lice.

Another analysed aspect of living conditions in Ireland was health and illnesses. Generally pneumonia, heart disease and cancer were the most common killers but the most feared disease, the main menace, was tuberculosis. TBC and also unsterilized milk caused there to be a significant amount of handicapped people who were unable to fend for themselves or to communicate their simplest needs. Death rates in Ireland during the first half of the 20th century were alarmingly high. The most shocking mortality rates were the infant ones.

There is no sign of handicapped people from unsterilized milk or TBC in the memoir but Child death is depicted. At the beginning of the book the McCourts' daughter dies. Later, in Limerick, Frankie's little twin brothers Oliver and Eugene die from pneumonia caused by poor living conditions, wetness and the lack of nutritious food.

Lack of nutritious food is another part of the analysis of living conditions in Ireland. It is also another reason why children were so easily susceptible to diseases, and died as a result of malnourishment. Cheap bacon, odd scraps of beef or fish supplemented with vegetable, invariably confined to potatoes and cabbage were on the daily menu for those families whose breadwinner had a job. Pig or sheep head was the typical food for the poor. Even butter was not available for these families. For those who could afford this luxury, cheese and eggs were on the list of the daily diet.

It may seem that the Irish diet was quite balanced, nonetheless, in *Angela's Ashes* the opposite is true; the menu of the McCourts was constantly the same: bread, tea and for father usually also porter. Only occasionally when Malachy finds work and does not drink the whole wage, they have also eggs or ham. For Christmas dinner they get a food voucher from the St. Vincent de Paul Society for a sheep or pig head, potatoes, cabbage and cider.

Last but not least, the significant aspect of living conditions in Ireland depicted in this thesis was Poverty. Many families had to rely on the dole and the charity of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. The St. Vincent de Paul Society was the largest lay Catholic charitable agency of all Ireland. Charities aid the poor providing coal, furniture, clothes, or food docketts.

The St. Vincent de Paul Society in *Angela's ashes* also plays an important role in the McCourts' lives. They get second-hand clothes, shoes or furniture, coal, and food from charity; however, it happens a few times that Angela is compelled to beg in a local church for the leftovers from priests' dinner.

There were hordes of ragged children in the streets in all weathers, barefooted and insufficiently clothed. It was on a daily basis that the streets were full of trading boys and girls, trying to earn few coins for food. Such street traders, generally ranged in age from 10 to 15 years, and mostly come from the poorest working-class homes.

This is a bit different in the memoir. Frank in does not work as a trader, but is also compelled to work from a very early age. He is only eleven years of age when he starts delivering coal on the float with Mr. Hannon.

However, though *Angela's Ashes* achieved enormous success, Frank McCourt was criticized by the local people of Limerick and its surroundings; he was blamed for exaggerating the stories of poverty and hardship in Limerick and some of the critics even claimed that the book was strongly anti-Limerick and anti-Catholic. Whether McCourt exaggerated or not, similar or in many cases, even worse stories are recounted not just in Ireland, and they have proved to be true. The living conditions which McCourt depicts in his memoir were similarly described in other history books, memoirs and other stories.

Resumé

Irsko, na počátku dvacátého století, bylo jednou z nejchudších zemí celé Evropy a velká část jeho obyvatel žila v naprosto nedostačujících životních podmínkách. V období hospodářské krize bylo velice problémové najít jakékoliv zaměstnání. Lidé mnohdy žili v činžovních domech bez elektrického připojení, s jedním vodovodním kohoutkem pro celý dům, a velice často i sdílenými toaletami nejen pro dům, ale mnohdy i pro celou ulici. Jídelníček chudší části společnosti se častokrát skládal pouze z chleba, černého čaje a z pravidla také černého piva, které je pro Irsko typické. Nemůže být tedy divu, že emigrace rapidně stoupala a populace Irska nepřesahovala tři miliony. Irové nejčastěji emigrovali do Anglie či Spojených států amerických.

Tato práce pojednává právě o životních podmínkách v Irsku, a to v první polovině dvacátého století. Autorka zkoumá formaci životních podmínek v Irsku teoreticky, studováním irské kultury a prakticky, vyhledáváním konkrétních případů v díle *Andělin popel*. Jako hlavní cíl bakalářské práce si autorka určuje charakteristiku popisu životních podmínek, jak jsou vyobrazeny v knize *Andělin popel*, a obecné srovnání s životními podmínkami v celém Irsku.

První, teoretická část se věnuje životopisu autora a důležitým událostem v jeho životě, společně s ohlédnutím za jeho nejvýznamnější díly. Tato část také obsahuje stručný souhrn obsahu knihy *Andělin popel*.

Následující část zachycuje situaci v Irsku v první polovině dvacátého století. Jsou zde zmíněny nejdůležitější události v historii Irských států, ve spojení s rozebíraným dílem. Tato kapitola obsahuje nejdůležitější segment celé práce, a to analýzu životních podmínek, jmenovitě stravovacích návyků, ubytovacích standardů pracovní třídy či zdravotních obtíží irských obyvatel. Tato kapitola se dále zabývá životními podmínkami spojenými s chudobou a alkoholismem.

Ubytovací standardy dělnické třídy v Irsku, nejen v první polovině dvacátého století ale i ve století předešlém, byly velice nízké. Ubytovací standardy jsou specifikovány na činžovní domy, z nichž většina není připojena ani k elektrickému proudu a voda je vyvedena pouze do jednoho vodovodního kohoutku pro celý dům. Toalety bývají sdíleny se všemi obyvateli domu, kterých v těch nejhorších případech, bylo čítáno přes sto. Mnohočlenné rodiny žijí pouze v jednom pokoji, mnohdy jen se základním vybavením, často bez postelí či skříní.

Analýza memoáru ukázala podobné podmínky pro bydlení, jako část teoretická. McCourtova rodina se navíc každý podzim potýká se zatopením spodní části svého, v této podstatě luxusního, dvoupatrového, několika pokojového, domu. Přízemí díky vlhkosti nazývají Irskem, kde zůstávají přes jaro a léto, do podkroví se stěhují na podzim a přebývají zde přes zimu. Představují si při tom, že odjíždí na dovolenou do teplých krajín a proto je jejich podkroví nazýváno Itálií. Jeden suchý záchod sdílí s celou ulicí. Z toho důvodu jsou ve všech domácnostech běžné nočníky, do kterých jsou vykonávány potřeby, a poté vyprazdňovány do suchého záchodu.

Zdravotní podmínky, zejména dělnické třídy v určeném období, byly stejně špatné jako ubytovací standardy. Dospělí lidé ale i děti umírali na zápal plic i rakovinu, ale největší hrozbou byla tuberkulóza. Od roku 1902, kdy tuberkulóza vypukla, pouze v Dublinu umíralo ročně 1 300 dospělých a dětí, a to pouze následkem této nemoci. Úmrtnost v Irsku byla velice vysoká, a to především ta dětská. Nejvyšší dětské úmrtnosti bylo dosaženo v letech ve čtyřicátých letech, kdy umíralo více než 80 dětí z každých 1 000 narozených.

Jak bylo poukázáno, i v knize *Andělin popel* je nejen dětská úmrtnost vyobrazena velice často. Vysněná dcera Markétka umírá již na prvních stranách tohoto bestselleru. Později umírají i dva chlapečci, dvojčata. Ze sedmi dětí, které Anděla měla, zbyly pouhé čtyři, které vyrůstaly ve špatných podmínkách, většinu svého dětství trpěly hladu. Nejčastější stravou byl McCourtům suchý chléb a černý čaj, pro otce často také pinta piva. Kdyby otec býval nepropil všechny své výplaty, které v několika málo pracích dostal, rodina by se bývala pravděpodobně měla mnohem lépe.

Alkoholismus v Irsku má dlouholetou tradici. Již desetiletí se vedou dlouhé debaty o tom, zda je alkohol v Irsku důležitou sociální složkou či nikoliv. Statistiky poukazují na dlouholetou historii v konzumaci alkoholu a jeho důležitým místem v Irské kultuře. Existuje mnoho teorií o důvodech Irského alkoholismu, jako kulturně-sociální, ekonomické, či environmentální faktory. Jednou z mnoha příčin může být také vysoká nezaměstnanost.

Co se nezaměstnanosti týče, severní Irsko na tom bylo mnohem hůře než Irská republika. Proto Irové opětovně emigrovali za prací nejčastěji do Anglie či Ameriky, o čemž také pojednává jedna z kapitol. Irové viděli Ameriku jako zemi neomezených možností. V knize je popisována jako země, kde lidé, kromě tance, nemají co jiného na práci, chodí oděni v luxusním barevném oblečení, ověšení zlatem a stříbrem, a v jídle se pouze šťourají a vždy po nich na talíři něco zbude.

V době hospodářské krize bylo snem každého Ira spatřit sochu svobody a v této svobodné zemi zůstat až na věky. Tento Americký sen se v mnohých případech stal skutečností, ovšem velice často irské představy nebyly naplněny. Sám Frank McCourt si, po opětovném návratu do Ameriky ve svých 19 letech, musel vystačit s dvěma dolary na celý týden a živil se pouze banány, jak popisuje ve své knize *'Tis*.

Poslední kapitola mimo jiné zohledňuje i možný subjektivní přístup autora. Zahrnuje polemiku o možném odklonu od reality a o žánrovém zařazení díla. Zamýšlený cíl práce tvoří srovnání životních podmínek v Irsku v první polovině dvacátého století a jejich dokumentací v samotném díle.

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Appendix

Appendix A – Infant Mortality Rates

Figure 1 Irish Infant Mortality 1925-1960



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Appendix B – The Children of the Slums



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Appendix C – Comparison of Unemployment in Northern Ireland and Great Britain

UNEMPLOYED AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION		
	Northern Ireland	Great Britain
1922	22.9	14.1
1926	22.3	12.3
1930	24.3	15.8
1934	23.9	16.6
1938	28.0	12.8

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