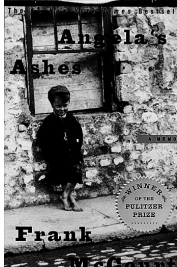


# “7th Step”

SONG BY DEBORAH PARDES



## SONGWRITER'S STATEMENT >

“I was held captive by the young imagination of Francis McCourt—a little Irish boy who stole my heart the second our eyes locked in the pages of *Angela's Ashes*. His triumphant life breathed hope into my own, and from this song the idea of The SIBL Project was born.”  
—Deborah Pardes

## LYRICS >

Mom makes the tea, Mom fries our last piece of bread  
I lay very still here inside my head  
Mom feeds the baby milk from her breast  
I see she is sad 'cause she can't feed the rest

But me and my brothers—we're doing ok  
The house has got holes—the rain came in today  
Upstairs we call Italy and Ireland's below  
And on the 7th step between them is where the angels go

Dad spends his wages down at the pub  
While we sit here hungry for his fatherly love  
He wakes us from sleep and makes us recite  
“Long live the Irish—we should die in the fight”

But I'm still too young—seven going on eight  
Here's where I live I sit on these stairs and I wait  
Upstairs we call Italy and Ireland's below  
And on the 7th step between them is where the angels go

I steal a penny. I hope nobody sees  
I go to confession and I drop down on my knees

If Jesus should come I'd take him around our lane  
He'd see how we live and suffer for his name  
I'd take him upstairs to Italy and Ireland below  
And on the 7th step I'd show him where the angels go

## SOURCE >

### ANGELA'S ASHES BY FRANK MCCOURT

A poignant memoir of a poverty-stricken childhood in working-class Limerick, Ireland, with a grieving mother, an alcoholic republican father, and a troupe of brothers. Critics and readers applauded the compassion and humor that McCourt generated in this harsh story, and his remarkable rendition of a small boy's point of view. The book won the 1997 Pulitzer Prize and was made into a film.

## MUSIC ►

This song starts out very small, musically speaking. The voice is that of a little boy, sung by a woman. The gentle beginning helps set the stage for seeing life through a child's eyes. The artist chose a sparse arrangement to reflect a stark environment—a poor Irish family has very few possessions. All the instruments are organic—no electric sounds are used. This reinforces a simple context through which the storyline can evolve without clashing with undue modern sounds. The use of a violin adds a lyrical layer of emotion. The pan flute in the second verse has a hollow sound to it, to evoke memory, longing, and a haunting past. At the beginning and end of the song, we hear snatches of the author's own spoken voice.

## SUITABILITY ►

Readers of all ages and most education levels can enjoy *Angela's Ashes*. At 363 pages in paperback, the whole book may be too long for beginner readers. Instead, you could focus lessons on the song, the film "Angela's Ashes," and/or excerpts from the book.

As a teaching resource, the compelling and lyrical style of the book invites an exploration of language, especially figurative language. It offers insight into the Depression era in Ireland and Brooklyn and a sense of the searing deprivation suffered by families such as the McCourts during this period.

## LESSON SUGGESTIONS ►

**MOTIVATION FOR READING ►** A literacy tutor used the song "7th Step" in a learner-support class at a correctional institution. The men in the class were between 19 and 42 years old, and their literacy levels varied greatly. One man was just beginning to write the alphabet, for instance, while another could read and write quite well but struggled with basic math. When the class began, most of them were strangers to each other.

The song provided a springboard for an informal discussion on reading, and also as a way for class members to become comfortable sharing their opinions with each other in a safe environment. Everyone participated, often revealing personal information with the group. For many, the song touched on familiar circumstances in their own childhoods: poverty, hunger, parental alcoholism, and abandonment. "I believe it is their ability to relate intimately to the main character that will entice my students to read *Angela's Ashes*," the tutor said. "One student has already begun to read it, with a tutor and dictionary by his side."

At the end of the class, one man asked, "You mean people really want to read about a life like that?" The tutor explained that the book was on the New York Times bestseller list for weeks and that there are shelves of similar stories, just waiting to be read. The man responded that he too has a story. This song can motivate learners to tell or write their own memoirs as well as encouraging them to read those of Frank McCourt.

**RESOURCES ►** Information about the book and a list of useful discussion questions are available on [http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides/angelas\\_ashes.asp](http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides/angelas_ashes.asp)

## ... LESSON SUGGESTIONS >

**PLACE >** What do we learn about Limerick from the book? Do you as a reader feel that you know what it was like to live there? How does McCourt give you this sense? Students may be interested in a virtual tour of the Limerick of *Angela's Ashes*:

<http://www.iol.ie/~avondoyl/angelas1.htm>

**GENRE >** *Angela's Ashes* can be used to examine the genre of memoir and the characteristic features of memoir writing. What other memoirs have you read? What do memoirs have in common? Will you seek out other memoirs to read?

Other songs inspired by memoirs are:

"Paula Ausente" Chapter 2, track 5—Isabel Allende's *Paula*

"Bobo's Country" Chapter 2, track 6—Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Lets Go to the Dogs Tonight*

"Don't Let Me Fall" Chapter 2, track 10—James McBride's *The Color of Water*

"Memoir" can be defined in many ways. It is what a person writes when she not only tells a story from her life, but also tries to understand what the story means in light of current knowledge. But memoir is not a laundry list of events in one's life, nor is it a diary. Memoir is organized writing that is meant to make a point, just like any other good story. Judith Barrington's book, *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*, is a good resource. Read extracts at <http://www.judithbarrington.com/writingthemem.html>.

Of the many memoirs that exist, a teacher chose these for use with adolescents:

*The Color of Water* by James McBride

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou

*This Boy's Life* by Tobias Wolff

*When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago

*Always Running—La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* by Luis J. Rodriguez

*Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas

**TELLING STORIES >** *Angela's Ashes* unfolds through story telling as Frank recounts the stories that spoke to him as a child. They are weird and wonderful, humorous and surreal, lending poignancy to his drive to understand the harsh world around him. Through the stories, different points of view are heard: his father's, his mother's, Frank's brothers' and aunts'. These tales offer an opportunity to explore story telling and viewpoint with students.

Tell the story of each main character in the book from their point of view.

Recall a story you were told as a child, tell it to the group, and/ or write it up.

Write your own children's story.

# Lesson Plan “7th Step”

## FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE & POINT OF VIEW • BY MAXINE EINHORN

### LEVEL ►

This module, effective in Language Arts subject areas, was designed by the curriculum consultant of KQED’s Adult Learning Project. It is suitable for adult learners, and for high school and college groups of any age.

### PARTICIPANTS ►

These guidelines assume a teacher and a class of students, but the methods work in tutor-learner pairs or other combinations.

### LENGTH ►

The module covers two sessions of 45 minutes each.

### MATERIALS ►

CD player and SIBL *Chapter One* CD  
Copies of the lyrics of “7th Step,” large font  
Copies of the book—page references are based on the 1997 Flamingo paperback edition  
A copy of the 1998 feature film “Angela’s Ashes” and playback equipment (tested in advance!)

### OBJECTIVES ►

After these sessions, students will be able to:

- distinguish between literal and figurative language and give examples
- describe and explain images used in song and writing
- develop and explore descriptive and imaginative expression both verbal and written
- develop creative writing skills
- write or tell a story from a point of view

### ACTIVITIES ►

**PREPARATION ►** You may want to consult background information on figurative language. Sources include <http://www.pfmb.uni-mb.si/eng/dept/eng/text/figlang.htm>, and *Pre-GED Writing*, Steck-Vaughn Company.

**INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY ►** To get a sense of the reading habits of the group, invite responses to the following questions:

Do you like to read?

What kinds of books do you choose?

What would you look for in a book?

Do you go to the library?

Would you be encouraged to read a book from seeing the movie or would you look for the movie after reading the book?

Introduce *Angela’s Ashes* to the class.

Read pages 1–2 to the class as far as “...but we knew it was only the rain.”

**UNIT 1**  
**PAINTING**  
**PICTURES WITH**  
**WORDS ►**

This unit explores figurative language and the way in which the little boy's feelings, fears, and imaginings are expressed in the words of the song. The song lends itself beautifully to this work, and the activities in the lesson draw on the use of language in the song, both literal and figurative. Using extracts from the book and images in the song, students are encouraged to think about figurative language and how to use it.

Introduce the song to the class and explain how it is based on the book. Distribute copies of the lyrics and play the song to the class. Explore the students' responses.

- What did you think of the song?
- How did it make you feel?
- Would you describe it as "sad"?

Beginning with a literal exercise, have the class talk about what exactly is happening in the song "7th Step." Use the following questions as prompts.

- Who is talking in the song?
- Where are they?
- What is the family like?
- What impression do you get of Frank's father?
- What impression do you get of his mother?
- What impression do you get of their life?

Give a brief overview of the story and read two short extracts from the book.

"Two weeks before Christmas Malachy and I come home from school in heavy rain...That's what we'll call the upstairs from now on, Italy." (p. 104)

"The angel that brought Margaret and the twins comes again and brings us another brother...asking too many questions is an affliction". (p. 111)

Working in pairs, clarify the images in the song. What do you understand by:

- " I lay very still here inside my head"
- " The house has got holes"
- " Upstairs we call Italy and Ireland's below"

Share responses with the group.

Introduce the concept of figurative language, giving a range of examples and brainstorming examples with the group.

When you describe exactly how something is—looks, smells, tastes, feels, sounds—that is **literal** language. For example, "She was upset" is a literal description.

**UNIT 2**  
**THROUGH THE**  
**EYES OF**  
**A CHILD ►**

When you describe something by comparing it to another thing that may be very different or using words in unusual ways to make a point, that is **figurative** language. For example, “She cried like a baby” is figurative language. (Reference: *Pre-GED Writing*, Steck Vaughn, page 41)

For example, this is how Frank describes his father.

"I think my father is like the Holy Trinity with three people in him, the one in the morning with the paper, the one at night with the stories and prayers, and then the one who does the bad thing and comes home with the smell of whiskey and wants us to die for Ireland."

What images are conjured up by this description of his father?  
Why is the use of “Holy Trinity” so powerful?

Ask students to work in pairs:

Describe a person or place so that your partner can really imagine that person or place.

Then, working individually:

Write a paragraph describing the person or place, painting as real and vivid a picture as you can.

This unit looks at the way a child’s point of view is constructed. It is useful to compare the strategies of film in representing childhood with the language of the song and book. In the book, it is through the immediacy and guilelessness of the language, and through the stories, that Frank makes sense of his world. He is confused, and powerless, but his innocence and vulnerability become deeply moving as we listen to his unquestioning acceptance of the tales he is told.

In the film, the visual language of childhood is created through camera angles and edits which represent adult power bearing down upon the child who is overwhelmed by events, excluded by whispers, or confused by the complexities of the world of grown-ups. In the song, the images create the viewpoint of the child. He observes his world in stillness, waiting on the stairs, looking for his dad, hungry and damp.

View a seven-minute segment from the beginning of the film that shows the death of the new baby Margaret. Ask the students to focus on the children as they watch the clip.

Invite students to work in pairs to respond to the following questions:

- Who do you see in this clip?
- How do you think the children feel?
- How do you know?
- How is their vulnerability conveyed?
- Do they understand what is happening?
- How do they appear in the frame?

## SONGS INSPIRED BY LITERATURE, CHAPTER ONE • TRACK 10

Read the same event from the book (pp. 28–34) to the class. “They’re talking about Margaret now and I’m forgotten...I wish little Margaret could be here for the soup.”

Discuss the same questions in relation to the extract from the book (except the last question) and compare the way the child’s point of view is constructed in the film and the book.

Think about the images in the song. How is the voice and perspective of a child expressed in these words from the song?

*I steal a penny. I hope nobody sees.  
I go to confession and I drop down on my knees*

*If Jesus should come I'd take him around our lane  
He'd see how we live and suffer for his name  
I'd take him upstairs to Italy and Ireland below  
And on the 7th step I'd show him where the angels go.*

Introduce the idea of strong childhood memories. Give an example such as Frank’s memory of the Catholic Church and confession. There are many hilarious excerpts in the book on this topic in Chapter IV. Read the following extract to the class.

“I try to listen to Willie’s confession when he goes in...  
No, my child, you have a long way to go. Now say an Act of Contrition and remember Our Lord watches you every minute. God bless you, my child.”

Discuss these memories with the class.

Does the Church appear as a protective and supportive institution? How would you describe Frank’s memories of the Church?

Ask students to share a significant memory with a partner. This could focus on someone who was powerful in your life when you were small.

Have two or three students share their memories with the group—but only if they are comfortable doing so.

Write a page on your childhood memory using these questions:

- What was the memory?
- Why did you choose it in particular?
- Why was it powerful?
- Can you remember your feelings at the time?

### FOLLOW UP ►

Read chapter IV of *Angela’s Ashes*.