The following writing sample is taken from a book review written as one of the requirements of a course taken during my master's program.

Intended Audience: This book review is not intended for high school students. This book is billed as a coming of age or bildungsroman, however, I intend to review this book as one that acts as adult apologia. The scholar of this sub-genre will be more interested in McCourt's perceptions of American culture as well as the perceptions he has of the Irish in America and how he apologizes for his deviance. His stories and musings reflect an unparalleled sense of candor that even brings to mind questions of authenticity. The scholar of apologia will appreciate the complexity of this text and its comedic dark undertones.

McCourt, Frank. *'Tis: A Memoir*. New York, NY: Scribner, 1999. Print
$26, Hardcover
ISBN: 0-684-84878-3

Frank McCourt was born in New York in 1930. He moved back to Ireland during the Great Depression, only to come back and finally settle in New York again (Grimes). He is the author of a bestseller *Angela's Ashes* (1996), as well as two other popular texts: *'Tis* (1999) and *Teacher Man* (2005). McCourt was a successful New York City school teacher who was noted as saying that one's best material is themselves (Grimes). McCourt went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for his first memoir that chronicled the depression and poverty of his childhood. Three years later, *'Tis* was written. Previous critics and reviewers usually model *'Tis* as being framed within the context of its predecessor, *Angela's Ashes. Angela's Ashes* took place in Ireland during Frank's youth and chronicles Frank's life and dealings with his alcoholic father and a mother, who had to beg to support her children. Critics seem to be split on the notion that *'Tis* matches up to *Angela's Ashes*. Some bill the book as "angrier" while others consider the newer text to be "honest" and "refreshing" (Kakutani; Bush). The jacket of the Scribner edition echoes this sentiment and highlights Frank's "incomparable voice" and "astonishing ear for dialogue." The highlighted book jacket reviews also note that the humor found within the text characterizes his "childhood" and call the author "young Frankie" which frames it in the context of *Angela's Ashes* (Finn; Caldwell). What these previous reviews, as well as the paratext of the memoir, seem to ignore is the viability of this text as a standalone novel as well as its movement away from McCourt's childhood. Additionally, Frank is a grown, independent man at this point but, as will be critiqued, never truly goes through a change in maturity.

Taken out of the context of being a sequel, and yet another installment to what reviewers make a trio with *Angela's Ashes* and *Teacher Man*, this text can be used as a way to analyze the navigation of identity within a new cultural landscape. *'Tis* specifically deals with coming to a new country and an attempt to reconcile one's culture and ethnicity against what is defined as

"Americaness." *'Tis*, while humorous, is a darker and deeper text that highlights the fear one has of being outcast or marked as "Other." McCourt is consistent with theme which can be broken down into three categories underscoring this identity reconciliation: Frank's propensity to self-monitor regardless of surrounding based on external and stereotypical notions of "Irishness," his struggles with religion, and his treatment of women. Through an Irish upbringing, and transferring of that knowledge and custom to a new environment, Frank seeks to reconcile his identity and become what he thinks is American which, at times, lands him into trouble due to his candid attitude. McCourt's strongest selling point of this text is its sarcasm and candor. However, this candor is always framed within the context of how he thinks he should act. McCourt tries very hard to describe an idealized version of the life he attempts to find in America. In the end, he concludes "... [M]y mother had warned me, stick with your own" (352). The culmination of his adventures forces him to realize that an idealized American identity isn't actually real. McCourt, as the author, saves this realization until the end.

'Tis chronicles three decades starting with Frank's arrival to New York City from Limerick, Ireland in 1949. Frank characterizes himself as having a "pimply face, sore eyes, and bad teeth" as a result of a lack of access to healthcare as a child (13). Generally, Frank focuses on a more physical characterization of individuals. Women, including his first wife, are seen as possessing a "bosom that is an occasion of sin" or a mass of sexualized body parts (169). He tends to characterize men as unattractive focusing on their maladies such as "eyebrows that shoot up to [their] forehead" (88). Thus, his characterizations tend to fall flat and appear more physical than anything. The reader never gets a more detailed description of these characters and these remarks are overshadowed by Frank's candor. Frank's own maladies follow him as he attempts to gain employment first at the Biltmore Hotel where he caters to the upper crust. Eventually,

Frank switches jobs to work on the docks. He later endures a brief stint in the army where he rises to a clerk position and trains dogs. This allows him the ability to use the GI bill and acquire an education which helps him to become a teacher in the New York City school system. Education is a constant theme throughout the text. Frank's desires to read and learn, however, are undermined by his fall into alcoholism. Despite this, Frank maintains a strong drive to pursue an education and is inspired, and even jealous, of the other American students he comes into contact with. Frank works hard to bring his brothers and then his mother to America. His father remains in Ireland where he never moves past his alcoholism. Frank attempts to make his mark but, in the end, emulates some of his father's problems. Frank's identifiable voice serves as a repetitive trope carrying the story, even in some of its darker times.

'Tis is a memoir that can be further classified within a variety of narrative subcategories. G. Thomas Couser's classification of memoir emphasizes the presence of sub-genres within the narrative. The conversion narrative highlights the individual who "converts from sinner to saint" (Couser 39). Ironically, Frank constantly toys with the idea that he is a sinner and could never be forgiven for his sins. In the end, he denounces his Catholic upbringing and fully turns away from the Church. This text appears to be more of an anti-conversion story and more along the lines of Couser's classification of apologia where Frank recognizes his wrongdoings and candid attitude but also "stands behind his actions" (Couser 40). The poverty and discrimination that he faces, many times at the hands of the Catholic Church, is used as a backing for his actions and denouncement of the Church. Thus, this memoir can also fall into the miserable category of a "nobody memoir" as Frank feels that he is made "Other" in his new homeland and continues to encounter misery (Couser 147). As discussed, other critics bill this text as a bildungsroman which sees the protagonist as forming an identity "through steady growth, or growth in stages,

rather than abrupt reversal or illumination" (Couser 41). This formation usually occurs as a child becomes an adult. Frank does not establish an identity through personal growth, instead he tries to meld in with his surroundings, forget his upbringing, and deny his roots while pursuing an idealized American identity. In the end, he is an alcoholic like his father, divorced, and not pictured as the best teacher, almost being fired from each job. The text is an explanation and apology to his Irish background and shows that he recognizes his wrongdoings but never has motivation to change. Scholars of apologia will appreciate the candor that this text brings to the category. This point saves Frank from total disrespect by the reader. Additionally, analysis of Frank's inability to reconcile his Irishness against self-proclaimed standards of "Americaness" highlight Frank's version of Irish struggles regarding religion and culture.

Frank's apology looks to the Catholic Church as the instigator of his deviance. Upon arriving in America, Frank has a hard time with maintaining his Catholic roots and staying close to his religion. One of his darker stories revolves around a priest who attempts to take advantage of him. When the priest comes back after seeking forgiveness at a retreat, Frank feels compelled to meet him since others would not believe him and he "wouldn't be surprised if priests walked on water" (62). His candor forces him into uncomfortable situations despite how he really feels. The reader may find a dark and dirty situation now humorous which supports Frank's ability to reconcile himself against how he thinks he should react. Because of his awareness of everyone around him, he feels that he needs to put on an act or try to be someone that he is not. This theme is apparent throughout the entire text and seems to be something that Frank never comes to terms with. Frank muses, "Sometimes I wish I could be a Protestant or a Jew because they don't know any better. When you belong to the True Faith there are no excuses and you're trapped" (114).

Thus, because he is Irish, he associates himself with prayer and Catholicism, however, the reader can note that throughout the text, he turns further and further away from the Catholic Church.

For Frank, church becomes more identifiable with Americans and "their state of grace" in his eyes (82). Even after his mother comes to America, Frank remains detached from the Irish sense of Catholicism. Only after both his mother and father pass away, and he returns to Ireland to disperse his mother's ashes, does he actually admit that he has "drifted from the church" (367). Even after this admission and he proceeds to his father's burial, Frank makes fun of his father in a coffin and compares him to a "seagull" with "missing teeth" and a "collapsed face" (365). He is hysterical but worries how to control himself so that everyone can perceive his tears as tears of grief rather than laughter. The church funeral therefore becomes spectacle and hides any final chance for Frank to change.

The tropes of self-awareness and shame regarding his Irish identity persist throughout the text. After Frank gets his first real job at an insurance company, he becomes excited at the fact that people on the train may think he is richer than he really is. He notes, "I might be wearing a suit...and getting admiring looks but I still can't help committing my daily deadly sin. Envy" (138). This envy is his wish to go to college and be like one of the American students. It is inferable, then, that Frank has a seemingly immature and self-aware approach to constructing his identity. This constructed reality is framed within the context of American youth rather than Irish youth. Each movement he makes is self-regulated. His physical maladies coupled with the fact that "[E]ven when [he tries] to sound American people look puzzled and say, Do I detect an Irish brogue?" make Frank stand out and unable to pass for the upper class Protestant student that he initially aims to become (170).

Frank thus constructs the American identity in opposition to his own: “If I didn’t have red eyes and an Irish accent I could be purely American and I wouldn’t have to put up with professors tormenting me with Yeats and Joyce...and what a beautiful green country [Ireland] is” (180). His maladies become representative of all Irish immigrants. One of the downfalls of this text is that Frank continually stereotypes as seen in the above quote. When he goes back to Ireland on a visit off of his army duty, he encounters some young boys that he finds similar to a younger version of himself. They throw rocks at him and he is annoyed thinking that the one boy dubbed “Scabby Eyes,” a name he previously reserved for himself, “[didn’t] notice [his] corporal’s stripes and have a bit of respect” (103). Frank suggests that the boy’s lack of respect is a product of his environment and where he grew up, similar to the way Frank behaved. He was “just as liable” when he was younger to torment someone in uniform. Instead of chasing after them, he gives them money for the movies. Scabby Eyes tells him he “has no arse” which is a slur for Americans and this makes Frank “happier than anything” since his American suit does not make him a stranger in his own hometown (103). When in both Ireland and America, Frank attempts to perform an idealized American identity but always fails to pass in both environments. As Frank tries to hide his Irishness and step away from it, he finds that everyone else exoticizes it. Americans continually use Frank’s ancestry and their contrived connection to it as a way to compensate for their actions. While these encounters mark his ancestry, Frank tries to avoid it and apologize for it. He uses stereotypes as validation for his personal maladies and his apologies fall flat.

Another memorable moment occurs while Frank is in the army. He gets into a fight with another officer. When he insults Frank for being Irish and makes a slur about his mother, he is forced to apologize. Frank notes that the officer’s apology centers along a selfish realization that

he comes from an Irish background. Frank notes, "... [O]ne day they're insulting your mother and the next day they're bragging their own mothers are Irish" (91). The scholar of apologia would find an analysis of these instances particularly thought-provoking: while Frank apologizes for his Irishness, others use it as a connection and the apology becomes insignificant. Even after these realizations, he still apologizes for attempting to be part of the middle class: "It was too much for me. I didn't know how to be a husband, a father, a house owner with two tenants, a certified member of the middle class" (351). The admission validates his attempts to maintain an idealized American identity which he continually fails to perform. One may question whether Frank McCourt has now come to this realization since the apology and his dealings with others reflect a need to compensate for degenerate behavior.

Another aspect of *'Tis* which may place Frank in a bad light for the reader, is the way that Frank chronicles his relationships and interferences with females. He does not seem to hold a lot of respect for females and according to him, has had little experience with females prior to his arrival in America. He treats his first wife, Mike, with a lack of respect which seems to be inherited from his army days where women were viewed as an escape and "easy." Frank classifies his dream wife through the repetitive trope of the classic American housewife: "I'd like... to sidle up to a blonde blue-eyed [girl]...and whisper I'm not what I seem...underneath, I'm just like them, a well-scrubbed soul dreaming of a house in a suburb" (82). Again, Frank tries to reconcile his own identity with that of the suburban American dream; however, he always acts in ways that make attaining this dream impossible. While in the army, Frank has sex with a young girl at a refugee camp in Germany. Later, Frank is ashamed of what he did but tries to reason it with the fact that he "got what [he] paid for" with his exchange of cigarettes and coffee (96). Frank gets the mumps from this encounter and winds up in a hospital. Frank never seems to

reflect on the encounter or recognize the implications of his actions, instead poking fun at his male nurse that he has dubbed a "fairy" who takes care of him in the hospital (99). With reference to girls, Frank's character continuously falls into question.

Throughout the remainder of the text Frank continues to act in opposition to the "American Dream" he proclaims that he wants. He meets Alberta Small, who prefers to be called Mike for unexplained reasons, in a college class. Frank is struck by her "luscious lips" and every other essentialized physical aspect of her body. Mike becomes the symbol of all of his American desires but he fails to maintain a steady relationship with her even after marriage. Because of Mike, Frank realizes even more that he has a drinking problem like his father but has trouble weighing his bachelorhood and being in a relationship. After one occasion where Mike provides him with an ultimatum for marriage, Frank muses, "I walk across Washington Square Park torn between my yearning for [Mike] and my dreams of the free life" (275). Frank continually idealizes the American Dream but falls victim to his father's habits. In the end, he loses Mike and any sense of this dream. The reader is left with an admission of guilt on behalf of Frank who notes, "The marriage crumbled. Slum-reared Irish Catholics have nothing in common with nice girls from New England" (352). He recognizes his inability to live his idealized American dream and attempts to apologize for his faults. The sarcastic apology attempts to win back the reader after he abandons his wife and child.

One of the strongest critiques of the text that is made apparent by Frank's sarcasm pertains to the authenticity of some of the more candid stories. In R.F. Foster's 1999 critique of *'Tis*, candidly titled "'Tisn't," questions of authenticity arise: "In *'Tis*, there is not a single New York institution that is sharply realized, with the possible exception of the Staten Island Ferry… this Village in the 1950s could be anywhere" (Foster 32). With Frank's propensity to self-

monitor and perform, as well as Frank's persistent candor, one may question the authenticity and validity of these self-reported stories, especially in the form of an apology meant to reconcile or explain his deviance. The aforementioned story of the refugee girl supplemented by his story of the mumps and "fairy," are just two of the stories that bring to mind his candor and belittling of something serious. For example, as a student, Frank writes a story for one of his composition classes about a bed that his mother had to get from a charitable society when he was younger. The story is written to emphasize his family's struggles and the poverty that they experienced. The instructor decides to read the story aloud in class, making its relationship to Frank apparent. Frank notes, "[The professor tells me] that my style is direct, my subject matter rich...he tells me I should continue to explore my rich past...The next time I have to take an English composition class I'll put my family in a comfortable house in the suburbs" (174). Therefore, the reader notes that his embarrassment regarding his past is evident. The reader is tasked with the question of whether or not this embarrassment has receded and whether or not he tells the full story or realizes that his sarcasm may cover up the whole truth.

One can also identify some "meta-authoring" as Frank's love for writing is established. Frank is initially inspired by his discovery of Irish literature and memoir. Some critics even go as far as to say that Frank borrows from Sean O'Casey, a twentieth century Irish memoirist (Foster 30). Frank muses, "There is no happily ever after in Sean O'Casey. His eyes are worse than mine, so bad he can barely go to school. Still, he manages to read, and teaches himself Irish" (151). Frank discovers that he "never knew" that one could write about Dublin or life in Ireland. O'Casey has inspired him to pursue Irish literature. His continuous emphasis on red eyes seeks to align himself with O'Casey as his admits. Frank's story, reviewers note, has resonances of O'Casey's life. If this text is a representation of apologia, then the argument is made stronger by

this accusation since Frank uses O'Casey as validation for his actions and stands behind his words.

Overall, this review concludes that the unparalleled sense of humor found within *'Tis* overshadows any question of authenticity. Frank's ability to tell a story and captivate the reader makes this memoir read like a novel. Themes of love and hardship are present throughout the text; however these themes are underscored by Frank's consistent sense of self-monitoring and attempts to fulfill an idealized American identity. In the end, he is forced to recognize his stereotyped Irishness and the fact that as he has tried to further remove himself from his identity, he has become more of the stereotyped Irish male. As has been noted and critiqued, this text does not fall into the previously dubbed category of a bildungsroman. Instead, Frank does not go through a single moment of maturity or growing up. He continually fails to maintain a sense of stable identity or recognize who he is. In the end, he admits to his faults but the reader never sees the identity that is established and is left with the final view of Frank laughing at his dead father and drinking after the funeral. This text, therefore, highlights the miserable encounters of a particular Irish male in twentieth century America. I have specifically attempted to keep this review separate from *Angela's Ashes* and *Teacher Man* as these chapters of Frank's life represent a stage that is separate from his childhood and adulthood. *'Tis* represents a middle ground or purgatory for Frank. The years described classify attempts at pursuit of a dream and subsequent failure. This description darkens a humorous text but is important to remember when attempting to analyze McCourt's work. Framed as an addition to the sub-genre of apologia, Frank consistently admits to fulfilling cultural stereotypes but also tries to compensate for his actions. The candor and wit within the text will carry the reader through and leave them with a good feeling overshadowing his darker admissions of guilt and shame. **4/5 stars**.