**A Tree Grows in Brooklyn**

**By Betty Smith**

**Target Objectives:**

* Analyze Characters
* Analyze Themes
* Work with Literary Devices (Characterization, Symbolism, Flashback, Foreshadowing, Metaphor)
* Make Text-to-Self Connections
* Contextualize Information from the Novel
* Learn new Vocabulary Words

**PART I: LITERATURE COMPREHENSION**

**Directions: Use each of the following study questions to guide your reading.**

**Look for specific examples from the novel and include them in your answer to each study question after you have completed the novel.**

**Study Questions**

* What role does song and singing play in the novel?
* What is Francie's relationship to reading and writing? Why is it important?
* How does Johnny's death serve as a structuring device for the book?
* In what way does it inform what happens after? How do things change?

**Directions: Answer each of the following literature comprehension questions in complete sentences. Use specific examples from the novel to support your answers.**

**Comprehension Questions**

* Where does the "tree" referred to in the title grow?
* What do Francie and Neeley do to make a few pennies throughout their childhood?
* What does Miss Tynmore, the piano teacher, say that Francie will be when she grows up?
* When Johnny dies, who offers Francie and Neeley work so that their family may have enough money to survive?
* Why does Katie originally fall in love with Johnny?
* Why does Aunt Evy take over her husband's (Uncle Willie's) milk route?
* Who sends Francie flowers on her graduation day?
* What does Katie whisper in Johnny's ear, just a few weeks before he dies?
* Why do some people think that Aunt Sissy is a bad woman?
* Who shoots the sex offender in Brooklyn?
* What does Mary Rommely advise Katie to do with the money she saves in her tin-can bank?
* What is the Nolan's religion?
* What does Francie burn after talking to her English teacher?
* What is Katie's job?
* What happens after Lee Rynor goes home?
* What will Annie Laurie's last name be?
* What happens to Francie that makes Katie think she can no longer protect her?
* What does the tree man think when he throws the tree at Francie and Neeley?
* Which of the following is not a place Francie visits the last Saturday in the book?
* Where will Francie go to college?

**PART II: VOCABULARY**

**Use a dictionary and copy the definitions and parts of speech of each of the following words. Next, use each word in a sentence.**

**Book #1:**

**1. Speculation 1. Conjecture 1. Extravagant**

**2. Interminable 2. Tenements 2. Anticipation**

**3. Concession 3. Reminiscing 3. Premonition**

**4. Consumption 4. Masquerade 4. Condense**

**5. Ritual 5. Emasculate 5. Monotonously**

**Book #2:**

**1. Intricate 1. Pompadour 1. Philosophy**

**2. Beguiling 2. Absolution 2. Mysticism**

**3. Consternation 3. Scrupulous 3. Articulate**

**4. Optimistic 4. Devious 4. Paradox**

**5. Bewilderment 5. Purgatory 5. Astonished**

**Book #3:**

**1. Unattainable 1. Languorously 1. Contemplative**

**2. Cultivate 2. Querulously 2. Metronome**

**3. Prosperous 3. Dubious 3. Piteous**

**4. Regimented 4. Sentimental 4. Lacquered**

**5. Surreptitiously 5. Raucous 5. Pathological**

**Book #4:**

**1. Effeminacy 1. Solicitously 1. Emphatically**

**2. Migratory 2. Bureau 2. Indiscriminately**

**3. Nullified 3. Brassiere 3. Dubiously**

**4. Reproach 4. Acquaintance 4. Kaleidoscope**

**5. Reverted 5. Incessant 5. Pension**

**Book #5:**

**1. Poignancy 1. Accountable 1. Amateur**

**2. Prominent 2. Matriculated 2. Camouflage**

**3. Recreation 3. Sentimental 3. Sulk**

**4. Virtuous 4. Dredge 4. Prohibition**

**5. Systematically 5. Confirmation 5. Desultory**

**PART III: CHARACTER ANALYSIS**

Characterization is the method used by a writer to develop how the character looks, acts and thinks. This activity show you how taking a second look at a character’s thoughts, actions and dialogue can improve your understanding of the text and the role of the character in the development of the plot. It also improves your critical thinking skills.

**Directions: For each of the major characters identified below, create a list of six things that they said or did in the novel (include the page number) and explain what each of these examples reveals about the character. Identify the character traits that are revealed by their actions.**

**Major Character List**

* **Mary Frances Nolan** - The protagonist of the novel, Francie is the daughter of second generation Irish Americans living in Brooklyn, New York in the early twentieth century. She is named after her father's dead brother's fiancée. She is a combination of her hard-working, practical mother and her imaginative, dreaming father. Growing up without luxury, and sometimes without friends, she loves to read, and creates new worlds through her writing.
* **Katie Nolan** - Francie's mother Katie comes from a family of strong women. She is extremely hard-working, she saves money as best she can, and will do anything so that her children can live a better quality life than she.
* **Johnny Nolan** - Francie's father Johnny is a young Irish singer-waiter. He loves his children, but is an alcoholic who cannot always be a good father in a conventional way. Like Katie, Johnny knows that an education will allow his children to live a better life than he has. He lives in a drunken dream world, where most of what he knows of life comes from the song lyrics he sings.
* **Cornelius Nolan** - Francie's younger brother by one year, he and Francie experience life together and grow to be close friends. He is both a loving brother and a typical boy.

**PART IV: THEME ANALYSIS**

A theme is a general concept or idea, such as love, justice, or sorrow. One way to help you think of themes is to complete the following sentence: “This is a book about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” There are many themes woven into this novel and this activity gives you an opportunity to think through some of these themes

**Directions: Examine each of the following issues in greater depth by answering *one of the discussion topic questions* for each theme.**

**THEMES**

**Class and Poverty:**

*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* cannot be separated from class issues. Nearly every anecdote, character, and chapter represents or addresses the problem of poverty in early twentieth-century America.

**Discussion Topic Questions:**

* **In one paragraph, describe two specific examples of the effects of class and poverty in the life of one of the major characters from the novel (include the page number).**
* **In one paragraph, compare and contrast two characters (from different class backgrounds) from the story and explain the role that class plays in your perception of each. Example: Are they more or less likeable because of their class status? Do you sympathize with them more or less because of their class status?**
* **In one paragraph, explain whether or not you believe class and poverty plays an important role in contemporary society. Include at least two specific examples to support your argument.**

**Education:**

Although Johnny, Katie, and Mary Rommely vary tremendously in personality, they all agree that education is the way out for the Nolan children. This theme goes along with the immigrant history of the Nolans and Rommelys. Mary Rommely does not even know when she moved to America that education was free; in fact, she still does not even know the word "education," but she rejoices over and over again that her daughters can read and write.

**Discussion Topic Questions:**

* **In one paragraph, describe two specific examples from the story that reveals one of the major characters' attitudes regarding the significance of education in their life (include the page number of examples).**
* **In one paragraph, select a character and give two specific examples from the story that highlight the role that education or lack of education played in that character’s acceptance in the society described in the novel (include the page number of examples).**
* **In one paragraph, explain whether or not you believe education plays an important role in contemporary society. Include at least two specific examples to support your argument.**

**Gender:**

Gender dictates many different social relations in this novel. Upon Francie's birth, Mary Rommely comments that to be born a woman is to be born into a humble life of pain.

**Discussion Topic Questions:**

* **In one paragraph, describe two specific examples from the story that reveals the role that gender played in the life of one of the major characters (include the page number of examples). Did the character benefit socially because of their gender? Did the character’s gender negatively affect their social status?**
* **In two paragraphs, compare and contrast the significance of gender in the novel to the role of gender in social, educational and economic advancement in today’s society. Does gender play a greater or lesser role in contemporary society as compared to the novel? Does gender affect the possibilities for social, educational and economic development today, as compared to the novel? Include specific examples to support your argument.**

**Perseverance through hardship:**

This theme relates closely to the American dream motif and the symbol of the tree. The strength of the Rommely women suggests that they can withstand any hardship.

**Discussion Topic Questions:**

* **In your own words, define what perseverance means to you. Describe two examples from your own life, in which you or someone you know showed perseverance.**
* **In one paragraph, describe two examples in which a character or characters showed perseverance in the novel and explain how/why each incident was an example of perseverance (include the page number of examples).**
* **In one paragraph, explain whether or not you believe perseverance is important in your life today.**

**Ethnic Identity:**

In the novel, immigration and ethnic identity are important themes among the people of Williamsburg. Immigration status and ethnic identity affects the social relationships of characters in the novel and also plays a role in character’s social and economic status.

**Discussion Topic Questions:**

* **In one paragraph, discuss how ethnic and religious identity plays itself out in the community? Give two specific examples from the story to support your argument (include the page number of examples).**
* **In one paragraph, describe how the various ethnic groups live side-by-side, and discuss how their backgrounds shape their values (include the page number of examples).**
* **In one paragraph, discuss how Francie's family fit into the ethnically diverse community in which they live. Discuss whether or not their ethnicity and immigration history affects their status in their community. Discuss whether or not you feel that class or ethnicity plays a larger role in the social status of the family (include the page number of examples).**

**PART V: SYMBOLISM ANALYSIS**

A symbol is an object or action that stands for something else. Francie sees the Tree of Heaven every single day and it is a touch of beauty in her daily surroundings. When Francie looks down from the fire escape, it looks like the tops of many green umbrellas. It makes sense that Smith would choose an object with which Francie is totally familiar. Here again, the author shows how one may view small, material objects and how these objects can have greater significance for individuals than their conventional usage or value. It is not a special tree, in a conventional sense, but, it has great significance within the plotline and themes of the novel.

**Directions: Use the writing prompt below to create a three paragraph essay on the symbolism of the Tree of Heaven.**

**Symbolism:**

Although the tree always represents hope and perseverance, its use at different points in the novel suggests it also has more specific significations.

Find three instances in which the tree is discussed, and list them including the page number. Next, in a three paragraph essay, discuss how the symbol of the Tree of Heaven is used differently in each of your three examples. Also, explain how it still represents the same idea despite its varied usage in the novel.