**A Tree Grows in Brooklyn**

**By Betty Smith**

**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.