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SAMPLE EXCERPTS FROM THE MONKEYNOTES FOR "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn"

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A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

by

BETTY SMITH



Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The setting of the entire novel is the Williamsburg slums of Brooklyn, from 1902 to 1919. Through the entire novel, the Nolan family lives in this poor neighborhood, only shifting from one area to another when the need arises. The Williamsburg streets, the neighborhood stores, the saloon that.....

CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Francie Nolan - the main character and protagonist of the novel. Francie is developed in the novel from a young girl to a mature teenager, who is characterized by good sense and

Katie Nolan - Francie's mother who is an intensely capable and practical woman. She

Johnny Nolan - Katie's husband and Francie's father. Although he is an inveterate alcoholic who.....

Neeley Nolan - Francie's younger brother and the apple of his mother's.....

Minor Characters

Sissy Rommely - Katie's sister who has a vivacious personality. In spite of the fact.....

Evy Rommely - Katie's other sister. Though more stable than Sissy, she has a wonderful.....

Mary Rommely - Katie's mother. It is she who imparts to Katie the need for.....

CONFLICT

The novel is really a story of coming of age; of Francie's growth into maturity; therefore, the conflict is really the maturing process. Her growth, however, is made more difficult by the poverty that surrounds her.

Protagonist: Francie Nolan, the protagonist of the novel, is a bright, creative, and determined.....

Antagonist: Francie's antagonist is the poverty that surrounds her. Although she

Climax: The climax occurs with the death of Francie's father, Johnny. Even though he.....

Outcome: Although Francie's life becomes more difficult after Johnny's death, she is too.....

PLOT (Synopsis)

The entire novel revolves around the Nolan family, which consists of Johnny, his wife Katie, and their two children, Francie and Neeley. Eventually, there is a third child, Annie Laurie. The family is close in spite of the fact that they live in the slums of Brooklyn and constantly fight poverty. In particular, the novel traces the growth and development of Francie from a little girl to a young sensible woman.

Katie, Francie's mother, is one of the four daughters of Mary Rommely. At a young age, Katie falls in love with Johnny Nolan, who is a dashing and handsome young man; she virtually snatches him from the hands

of her own friend and marries him. She soon gives birth to a daughter, Francie, and then to a son, Cornelius, who is usually called Neeley.

The novel begins with an explanation of Francie's outlook on the world around her. As a

THEMES

Major Theme

The central theme of the novel is the challenge of growing up, especially in a

Minor Theme

Closely related to the major theme is an emphasis on the difficulty of living in poverty. The neighborhood where Francie grows up is a Brooklyn slum, known for its lack of.....

MOOD

The novel has a variety of moods, but the predominant one is cheerful. When the family is together they cheer one another up, even though they live a life of poverty and scarcity; Francie and.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

BETTY SMITH

Betty Keogh was born on December 15, 1904, in Brooklyn, New York. She was the daughter of Catherine (Wehner) and John Keogh. Unfortunately, her father died when she was a young girl; as a result, after finishing eighth grade at the age of fourteen, she began working at a variety of jobs in order to support her widowed mother and her siblings. Her work included positions in factories and retail outlets. She also served as a reader and editor for the Dramatist Play Service.

Betty married George Smith, an attorney, in June of 1924, and they had two daughters, Nancy and Mary. From 1927-1930, she attended the University of Michigan as a special student, concentrating on writing classes. While at the university, she wrote for several newspapers; she also published several plays and won the Avery Hopwood Prize for Drama. In addition, she studied literature and drama at the University of North Carolina and Yale University, between 1930 and 1934, and became an actress for a short period of time.

During this period, Betty's marriage fell apart, and she and George divorced in 1938. In

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is the heart-warming and nostalgic story of a sensitive and intelligent girl, Francie Nolan. As in most of Smith's literature, the novel concentrates on the theme of social progress - of people rising above the station in life to which they were born. As a child, Francie lives in poverty, but she faces her problems with humor and pride. Thanks to her mother's influence, Francie is also.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

BOOK I

CHAPTER 1

Summary

Francie Nolan is a young girl of ten when the novel opens. She lives with her family in a small, shabby

house, located in Williamsburg, a poor section of Brooklyn, New York. Outside Francie's house is a tree that many people call "the tree of heaven." No matter where the seeds from this tree fall, they become small plants, which struggle to grow into big trees. During the course of the novel, Francie will be compared to this special tree.

For Francie and her brother, Neeley, life is not easy, for the family has no money for any extras or treats. Like other kids in Williamsburg, Francie and Neeley regularly scour through the garbage, searching for bits of metal, rubber, rags, and other junk. On Saturdays, they take their collection to Carney's Junk Shop and sell it for a few pennies. Carney usually gives Francie an extra penny if she allows him to pinch her hard on the cheek. With pennies in hand, Francie and Neeley normally go to Cheap Charlie's Shop or to Gimpy's Candy Store in order to spend their earnings. At Gimpy's, Francie usually chooses five cents worth of pink and white peppermint wafers. At home, the children are encouraged by their mother, Katie Nolan, to save their earnings by putting it in a tin-can bank.

Francie is a helper at home. In this opening chapter, her mother sends her to the store to buy bread, sugar, and other groceries. When Francie returns, the family sits down to eat without their father, Johnny, who has not returned. Although the children are often served coffee, they seldom drink it and often throw it away. Katie's sisters, Sissy and Evy, consider this to be a sinful waste.

Later in the chapter, Francie is again dispatched to buy some bread from the outlet store, which sells stale loaves at half-price. As Francie waits for the store to open, she notices an old man sitting outside in frayed clothes. She plays her favorite game of imagining him first as a baby, then a toddler, then a young man, eventually as a father, and finally as he is now. As she watches the old man, she suddenly has a panic attack, for she realizes that some day she will become old like him. Feeling anxious, Francie is glad to see the bread truck arrive. When the store opens, she dashes inside, buys the bread, and runs home.

Back at home, Francie follows Neeley outside, for she knows he is going to play baseball with his friends. The boys allow her to join the game, which is played furiously with much sweating and punching. Francie stops playing around two o'clock, for she wants to go to the library, where she visits almost everyday.

Notes

This first chapter in the book serves as an introduction to the setting and several of the key characters. All of the Nolan family is presented. Katie Nolan, the mother, is a pretty and vivacious woman of twenty-nine. She is also a very caring person and a good mother. She trusts her young daughter to go to the store alone to buy groceries. She also encourages Francie and her brother, Neeley, to save the money they earn by selling junk. Johnny Nolan, the father, is a handsome, lovable man, who drinks too much. He does not have a steady job, largely due to his drinking problem; but he does wait tables and sing in restaurants when he is needed. Although they sometimes fight, Francie and Neeley are close to each other. Even though Francie is older and stronger than her brother, she allows him to dominate her, simply because he is a boy.

The family lives in a small, shabby house in a Brooklyn neighborhood called Williamsburg; the entire suburb seems to be filled with poverty and filth. In spite of the impoverished, dirty surroundings, Francie has a cheerful attitude. She says that she loves Williamsburg, simply because it is her home. It is obvious that this young girl tries to make the best of things.

In Francie's yard there is a very special tree, "neither pine nor hemlock." It has pointed leaves and looks like a huge open umbrella. People call it the "tree of heaven," for its seeds fall to the ground and struggle to grow into small plants in a crowded, impoverished environment. The tree, which gives life amid the

poverty, becomes symbolic; it represents the grit and struggle of the Nolan family. Just as a plant grows in the place where the seed falls, the Nolan family digs into Williamsburg and makes the best of their bleak surroundings and impoverished existence.

The routine life of the Nolans and their neighbors is described in this chapter. The children of the neighborhood collect junk all week and sell it to a junk dealer on Saturday. Francie and Neeley are no exception. With excitement, they sell their junk and collect their pennies, spending much of their earnings at the candy store.

Mother (Katie Nolan) is portrayed as a wise woman and good provider. Even though she must buy the cheapest food, and in small quantities, she cooks it well and makes fine meals for the family. She also encourages the children to study hard and get a good education; she also tries to make them save their pennies. When her sisters scold her for being wasteful with coffee, a precious commodity, Katie argues, "I think it's good that people like us waste something once in a while and get the feeling of how it would be to have lots of money and not have to worry about scrounging." She obviously longs for more out of life although she seldom complains.

Francie is portrayed as a young girl who disciplines herself and who tries to find pleasure in every small aspect of life. She eats her sugar bun very slowly, trying to enjoy each bit of its sweetness. She joins her brother's baseball game and plays just as hard as the boys; however, she is disciplined enough to leave the fun behind and go to the library to find a book to read. When she goes to buy bread at the outlet store, she entertains herself by watching an old man and imagining what he was like throughout his life, from infancy to the present. She is filled with panic, however, when she thinks about herself as an elderly person. It is a vivid image of the fear that every child has of growing up and old.....

OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTERS

Francie Nolan

The entire novel revolves around Francie and tells her life story from the time she is a small girl until she has matured into a lovely, bright young woman heading off to college. Although her youth has been spent in poverty in the shabby neighborhood of Williamsburg, she has been blessed with a loving family and a good education.

Francie's life is difficult. Her father, whom she dearly loves, is an alcoholic and dies when Francie is young. Her mother, who must work very hard to make ends meet, is not a cheerful person. She often criticizes Francie, always expecting more from her daughter. Francie knows that Katie loves her younger brother better; she accepts the favoritism, even though she does not like it. When Katie allows Neeley to go on to high school and makes her work at a job, Francie finally grows very angry.....

Katie Nolan

Katie is Johnny's wife and the mother of Francie, Neeley, and Laurie. She is also the strong one in the family, who holds the Nolans together. She is also a source of strength and support to her two sisters, Evy and Sissy.

Through flashbacks, it is revealed that Katie learned from her own mother, Mary Rommely, the value of an education and saving money for a rainy day, two lessons that she practices throughout life. It is also

learned that she literally stole Johnny away from her best friend, thinking he was the.....

Johnny Nolan

Johnny is an irresponsible husband and father, who cannot hold down a job because of his drinking problem. In spite of his weakness, he a tender and loving man, whom Francie loves dearly. He is truly her favorite parent because of the kindness that he shows her.

As a young man, Johnny was handsome and well dressed. As a result, Katie fell in love with him the first time she saw him and succeeded in winning him away from her best friend. Even though

PLOT STRUCTURE

The entire novel has been divided into five parts, each dealing with a certain span of Francie's growth and maturity. The first section, including chapters 1 - 6, is set in the book's present and serves as an introduction. All of the key characters are introduced, and the poverty in which the Nolans live is fully described. In spite of the shabby surroundings and Johnny's weaknesses, the family is held together with a strong bond of love. The second section, including chapters 7 - 14, is a flashback to.....

THEME

The main theme of the novel is the challenge of maturing, especially in a poor environment. The growth of Francie, the protagonist, is traced from her early days in Williamsburg to her departure for college. Life is never easy for this young girl. She is surrounded by a mother who favors her brother Neeley and a father who drinks too much and cannot hold down a job. Although the family suffers.....

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the basic character traits of Francie and how they are developed in the novel.
2. The novel is really a coming of age story of Francie Nolan. Describe how she matures in the novel.....

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