

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

LIVING LITERATURE SERIES

BETTY SMITH

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

TEACHER'S GUIDE

GUIDE WRITTEN BY MARY ELLEN SNODGRASS

SYNOPSIS

In 1912, eleven-year-old Francie, older sister of Neeley and daughter of poorly educated descendants of immigrants—Austrian-born Katie Rommely and Irishman Johnny Nolan—lives in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn on Bogart Street near Manhattan Avenue. Francie was born in 1901, a year after her teenaged parents married. The next day, Johnny lost his job as school janitor because he got drunk to escape Katie's torment in labor pains. Neeley arrived the next year, eight days after his sister's first birthday.

The Nolans never prosper. Katie moves the family to a house on Lorimer Street where she can earn rent by mopping floors. Francie earns a few cents by selling metal lids and gum wrappers, rags, and rubber she scrounges from the dumb-waiter. Her father sporadically gets jobs through the union as a singing waiter. He entertains dinner parties with his Irish ballads and lapses into drink when unemployment deflates his self-esteem. In the wee hours, Francie lies awake to determine by his walk whether he is returning home drunk or sober and hides in her room from arguments that arise between him and Katie.

Against the squalor of life in the slums and classes where American-born children receive preferential treatment and immigrants are severely punished, Francie enjoys normal activities, such as jumping rope, weekly trips to the butcher, dime store, and confession, and music and art classes at school, which she enters at age seven so she and Neeley can enroll together. She finds additional solace in attempting to read every book in the library from A to Z. To recoup his losses with his daughter, Johnny concocts a lie about boarding Francie with relatives and transfers her within walking distance of their apartment to a superior school with fewer immigrant pupils and more humane faculty. Her mother realizes that Francie is clever and should complete high school, but Katie fears that more learning will distance her from her daughter.

From her vantage point on the fire escape, Francie focuses on a nearby tree, her Tree of Heaven, which "[likes] poor people." The one bit of nature in a slum area affords tangible evidence of the passage of the seasons. Election time, Halloween, Fourth of July, and other holidays lighten Francie's dismal existence. She yearns for a traditional Christmas and stands with Neeley against the blow of a large tree, which the dealer tosses their way on Christmas Eve. Together, brother and sister drag the tree home to decorate it. The holiday brings a warmth to the family and neighbors who see the children's efforts. Francie receives a postcard picturing a church, a scapular embroidered by her grandmother Mary, and a box of gilded pennies from Aunt Sissy.

Francie glories in serving her father, who calls her his Prima Donna. She irons his waiter's apron, heats his coffee, purchases disposable collar and shirtfront from the neighborhood store, and awakens in the early morning hours to question

Johnny about the wealthy homes where he sang. He rewards her with banquet table tidbits and descriptions of festivities that poverty denies her. Ordinary occasions inspire him to sing cheerful ballads and love songs. To introduce Francie and Neeley to the ocean, he escorts them by trolley to the seashore.

After a little girl is murdered, Johnny buys a gun with which to protect his daughter. In contrast to Johnny's idealism and noble gestures, Katie teaches Francie about sex and prepares her for womanhood. On the day that the murderer strikes again, he exposes his penis to Francie and tries to drag her away from the hall. Katie stalks him, shoots, and retrieves Francie. Neighbor women mutilate the pervert's body. A doctor examines Francie and finds no harm except a bruised hand, abraded knee, and acid burn on her leg where her father washed away the touch of the would-be rapist.

When Francie reaches fourteen on December 15, 1915, Johnny hits bottom after the union fires him for drunkenness. His departure into the cold depletes his failing health. Two days after leaving the apartment, he collapses in a doorway, is taken to Catholic Hospital, and dies of acute alcoholism and pneumonia. Katie, who is summoned by Officer McShane, sits with Johnny to the end and returns home to tell the children. She orders them not to cry because he has gone to a better place.

Johnny's funeral marks the new year. Flowers come from the police, the waiter's union, and many friends. Katie spends insurance money for the undertaker and funeral clothes and scrounges the cash to pay for a plot, the family's first piece of deeded land. Francie views the still corpse of her father and drops a clod of dirt on his casket at the burial. Neeley treasures his father's signet ring; Francie's keepsake is a monogrammed shaving mug, which patrons keep at the neighborhood barber shop. The children contemplate God and Jesus. Francie decides that, because God punished her father by taking him away, she will no longer believe in Him.

By March, Katie, heavy with an impending birth, can no longer keep up her cleaning jobs and cashes in the children's insurance policies for living expenses. By April, the money is spent. McGarrity, who owns the saloon Johnny frequented, learns of the Nolans' penury and, out of respect to Johnny and admiration for Katie, hires the children to keep house and prepare food for the saloon. He pretends to settle a two-dollar debt to Johnny and asks to visit Katie just to talk, but she rejects both his money and his visits.

With Neeley and Francie's meager earnings, Katie manages her final months of pregnancy and on May 28, 1915, gives birth to Annie Laurie, who looks like Katie. School ends for the Nolan children the next month. Francie receives red graduation roses from Papa, paid for by money he left with Aunt Sissy. Albie Seedmore asks Francie to the movies. Neeley works in an investment firm as errand runner. For two weeks, Francie winds wire stems with paper at a florist, then finds a second job filing clippings at a New York office. She excels at her work and

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

is promoted to reader. Katie is forced to choose which child deserves more education. She elects to send Neeley to high school so he can become a doctor. Francie, who must continue working, resents her favoritism.

Jobs bring the children autonomy and self-esteem. Modest prosperity lightens the dreary slum lifestyle. At Christmas, the Nolans eat well and buy presents. Katie gives Francie spending money and saves five dollars a week for college. The advent of World War I on April 6, 1917, ends Francie's filing job. She works as a night operator for a wire service and studies by day. In summer school, she manages restoration drama on her own; Ben Blake, a congenial student, assists her with English and chemistry.

Briefly, Francie dates Lee Rhynor, who proposes to her the night before he leaves for the front. He jilts her and marries Elizabeth before departing. Elizabeth learns of Lee's deception and writes to Francie. While Francie recovers from loss, Katie receives a marriage proposal from Officer McShane, a longtime family friend who is fourteen years older than Katie and the widower of Molly, who died of tuberculosis. He asks to adopt Laurie, but only if the older children concur.

Katie's remarriage brings stability to the Nolan clan. Francie seeks admission to the University of Michigan to be with Ben. The day preceding Katie's wedding, Francie pushes Laurie's carriage through the neighborhood and observes children reliving the events of her own life—gathering junk for sale, reading, and enjoying a view from the fire escape. Francie regrets that neighbors have had her favorite tree removed and tried to burn the stump, but gladdens at sight of sprouts, which prove that the tree refuses to be defeated.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

The child of German immigrants John C., an actor, and Catherine Hummel Wehner, Elizabeth "Betty" Wehner was born in December 15, 1904, [some sources give 1896] in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, where the struggle for sustenance equalized the lifestyle of Russian Jews, Polish Catholics, and Chinese Buddhists. At the time that Betty attended local grade school through the eighth grade, her father combated binge drinking, which reduced his ability to compete for jobs. After his death from pneumonia and alcohol poisoning, family finances forced Smith to end her education. To compensate, she worked at local offices and factories and read in her spare time at the public library.

Smith married George H. E. Smith, a law student, bore daughters Nancy and Mary, and divorced him in early adulthood. At age twenty-three, while her children were in school, she was allowed to enter the University of Michigan under a special program for students lacking a high school diploma and studied literature and writing from 1927 to 1930. At the same time, she wrote for the Detroit *Free Press* and the NEA syndicate. More study at Yale Drama School kept Smith in classes until 1934.

As a playwright with eighty titles to her credit, Smith found work in summer stock, as a radio broadcaster, and as a project writer and reader for the Federal Theater. During this period, she came under the mentorship of playwright Paul Green and received a Rockefeller fellowship. While studying drama in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 1943, Smith, influenced by Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River*, worked three years to complete *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, a semi-autobiographical

study of girlhood against a background of poverty and the stigma of an alcoholic father. One of the ten best sellers of its day, the book found a ready audience and placement as a Literary Guild selection. Her bestseller led to offers to write for Hollywood, but she preferred a position as drama teacher at the University of North Carolina, where she edited and produced plays. She was married to Private Joseph Piper Jones from 1943 to 1951. Smith died January 17, 1972, in Shelter, Connecticut at the Hewitt Memorial Convalescent Home.

CRITIC'S CORNER

A significant factor in Smith's success was the receipt of the Avery Hopwood drama award, which she earned even though she was not a full-fledged university student. The stipend and acclaim propelled her toward a career writing one-act plays and novels and acting in summer stock. Her first novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, earned kudos for social commentary on New York's Lower East Side and reflection on slum conditions for Irish immigrants. However, the initial acclaim was never repeated for later works, which lacked the conviction and verisimilitude which critics admired in the first effort.

The depiction of Betty Smith's reflections of life in turn-of-the-century Brooklyn in the 1945 Twentieth Century Fox film version of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* resulted in an Academy Award nomination for Tess Slesinger's script and an Oscar for James Dunn, who played the alcoholic father, Johnny Nolan. The movie is a superb blend of the direction of Elia Kazan and the acting talents of Joan Blondell, Dorothy McGuire, Lloyd Nolan, and Peggy Ann Garner as Francine. A 1965 cinema of *Joy in the Morning*, starring Richard Chamberlain and Yvette Mimieux, reflects the hindrances Smith combated in her attempt to get a college education.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To assess the importance of self-esteem
2. To note the relationship between setting and outcomes
3. To evaluate the need for friendship, nurturance, comfort, acceptance, and financial support
4. To justify the role of strong women in family life, education, and business
5. To define autobiographical fiction
6. To discuss the author's blend of humor, whimsy, terror, and grief
7. To comment on the importance of events of the early 1900s to the novel's development
8. To analyze the intermingling of customs, religions, dress, and attitudes in a multinational neighborhood
9. To characterize compromise and adaptation as two means of surviving poverty and loss

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To explain Katie's importance to the Nolan family
2. To assess Francie's talents and ambitions
3. To discuss the author's focus on realistic, sometimes bittersweet memories
4. To order events in Francie's childhood, particularly her father's death, graduation from eighth grade, Laurie's birth, Francie's first job, and enrollment in college
5. To describe significant figures in Francie's community, such as the junk buyer, barkeep, police officer, barber, butcher, dry goods clerk, and school personnel

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

6. To describe the author's use of birthdays and holidays as focal points
7. To predict Francie's success at the University of Michigan
8. To explain how Aunt Sissy acquires two living children after numerous stillbirths
9. To evaluate Francie's character

MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have a particular meaning in the novel. Explain each. Chapter and page numbers are given so that you can note the context from which the item is taken.

1. My folks over from Ireland the year the potatoes gave out. (Chapter 3, p. 33)

(Johnny casually reminisces with union members about the great potato famine of 1848. Preceded by bouts of blight or fungus in 1845 and 1846, the most critical blow fell two years later with an extensive loss of food and seed potatoes from a disease which caused tubers to wither and rot in the fields. Because northern Europeans depended on potatoes as a major source of carbohydrates, one fourth of Ireland's population died. The most fortunate moved to the New World, bringing a massive influx of Irish music and customs, Roman Catholicism, and solid family values to American communities. Boston and New York received record numbers of immigrants, many of whom found jobs as servants in the homes of the rich or as laborers for railroad companies and fishing fleets.)

2. When he was coming out of it, Katie locked him in the bedroom where he couldn't get anything more to drink. Instead of sobering up, he started to get delirium tremens. (Chapter 11, pp. 88-89)

(The severity of Johnny's addiction to alcohol is apparent by his bout of DTs, a period of neurological confusion marked by hallucination, tremors, thirst, sweating, and fear. So strong was Johnny's need for a drink that he "wept and begged by turns for a drink . . . He softened into a wailing screaming banshee." Sissy uses mothering, comfort, soft words, tears, sexual enticement, and sips of liquor to coax him out of his panic. He rejected her sexual allure, but holds fast to her womanly ministrations. By dawn, he was settled enough to sleep.)

3. The problem of what was delicately called "leaving the room" was a grim one. (Chapter 19, p. 135)

(To maintain firm control of their pupils, the repressive school faculty refuse the children toilet privileges so they can't wander the halls and restrooms. These inhumane conditions cause brutalized children to turn against their weaker fellow students. Guarding the doors at recess, the most predatory demand a penny each from students who press around the doors. The ones who lose control suffer the humiliation and discomfort of soiled clothing.

When Francie shivers from cold and wet clothes, Sissy learns that the unfeeling teacher had refused Francie's request to be excused. Sissy poses as Francie's mother, points to a policeman and claims he is her husband, and informs the teacher that Francie has a kidney disease. Sissy intimidates the teacher into allowing Francie to leave the room when necessary.)

4. Tammany, Tammany
Big Chief sits in his teepee,

Cheering braves to victory,

Tamma-nee, Tamma-nee. (Chapter 24, p. 156)

(Tammany was a Delaware chief who in 1683 sold William Penn the territory of Pennsylvania in exchange for a chest of beads, mirrors, bells, combs, scissors, blankets, and pots and pans. From 1789 until the rise of Italian factions in the 1940s, a political organization called the St. Tammany Order furthered democratic ideals in New York. Supported by working class neighborhoods, the Tammany political machine capitalized on Irish clannishness and burgeoned around the turn of the nineteenth century as immigrant neighborhoods coalesced into a strong political bloc. In exchange for votes, Tammany Hall leaders promised jobs, easy access to citizenship, lessening of deportation, reform of labor laws, government posts, and assistance to widows and orphans.)

5. They were all born with consumption, you know, inherited it from their mother who had it from a girl. (Chapter 24, p. 163)

(Officer McShane's fourteen children are plagued with tubercular infections from their mother. Tuberculosis, a major killer before the synthesis of antibiotics in the 1940s, is borne by unpasteurized milk or on droplets passed through the air by coughing. The disease causes pockets or tubercles to form in the lungs and usually leads to debility, fever, persistent cough, and massive hemorrhaging. If spread to other parts of the body, tuberculosis can infect brain, skin, bone, organs, and genitals.)

6. Miss Jackson teaches at the Settlement House and she has no money. (Chapter 27, p. 181)

(In the 1840s, settlement houses, a British phenomenon, grew out of the industrialization of large cities and the need of the aged, orphaned, disabled, mentally handicapped, and drug and alcohol addicted for assistance in locating services, medical care, transportation, and better nutrition. Social workers visited homes and organized neighborhood safe zones for children to protect the less fortunate from cold, starvation, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Since many of the neediest people were immigrants, settlement workers often provided a tie with the English-speaking world.)

7. They wanted me to turn in my Union button. (Chapter 35, p. 246)

(For unskilled or semi-skilled workers like Johnny, membership in a union was a lifeline. Most jobs were open only to members in good standing. Benefits such as burial, widow's pension, scholarships, unemployment, and disability were extended only so long as the worker retained membership and followed a strict set of rules, which governed conduct and ethics. Also, social and fraternal ties within the local union office provided friendship, support, counseling, and a place to call home when members were between jobs or down on their luck.)

8. As the door closed on them, the woman whispered bitterly, "Goyem!" and spat after them. (Chapter 45, p. 344)

(Bargaining is a must in local stores where price gouging is not uncommon and where buyers must fend for themselves. Katie and the seller dicker over the price of the moss green hat until Katie knows that she will go no lower. For the agreed-upon \$2.50, the children buy their mother a hat for Christmas and pay the ten cents extra for a box

A TREE GROWN IN BROOKLYN

with tissue wrapping. The seller spits a retort in Yiddish, labeling the bargainners as non-Jewish. The epithet implies that the Christian customers have taken advantage of the seller.)

9. Francie began the prayer for the souls in Purgatory. (Chapter 45, p. 351)
(At Christmas mass, Katie and her three children take the whole front pew. The church, decorated with stained glass, carvings, poinsettias, fir boughs, and a manger scene lures Francie into the mystery of Catholicism. She follows the order of worship chanted by priest and altar boy. The liturgy concludes in a confiteor or confession. The priest requests that worshippers pray for John Nolan. Francie adds her voice to those begging Jesus to grant mercy to souls immured in Purgatory, where sinners complete a lengthy penance for sins committed on earth before passing into heaven.)
10. He had confided in Neeley that he, McGarrity, was a man who had his ear to the ground and was therefore in a position to hear prohibition coming. (Chapter 55, p. 423)
(Anti-liquor forces such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, led by the hatchet-swinging Carrie Nation and her followers, were already strong in the midwest in 1913 and moved toward the east coast. With the impetus of religious and temperance groups, the consumption of alcoholic beverages ended with congressional passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in January 1919. The amendment was followed six months later by the Volstead Act, the legal machinery which halted the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages in the United States.)

COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages from the novel.

Questions 1 - 5 Literal Level

1. Describe Francie's interest in holidays and special occasions.
(To distract herself from the dreariness and poverty of life in the Lower East Side of New York, Francie looks forward to holidays. High on her list of enjoyable occasions are birthdays, which bring her closer to womanhood, election day, when she and her father discuss the importance of Tammany politics to Brooklynites, Halloween, when she and Neeley dress up in costumes, Fourth of July, when Francie celebrates her American citizenship, and Christmas, the family holiday which brings her closer to Johnny and Katie. One of their best Christmases occurs after Francie and Neeley catch and drag home a tree from a local lot. The family's celebration in traditional spirit affects not only the children but their neighbors, who observe the pride Francie takes in the tree.
Graduation, which takes place after Neeley and Francie complete eighth grade, brings a special dress, flowers, and a soda with Katie and Sissy. In private, Francie allows herself a good cry six months after Johnny's death because he left two dollars for the purchase of red roses to honor his Prima Donna. By the time that Francie is established in her New York job, Christmas affords the

family more chances to celebrate and enjoy food, warmth, and presents than ever before. The feeling of security and hope grows stronger with Katie's marriage to Michael McShane.)

2. How does Francie help her family cope with poverty?
(Managing on an iffy budget becomes a communal effort for the Nolans. Once a week, Francie and Neeley dicker with the butcher, insisting on fresh ground meat and adding at the last moment that they want extra suet to cook with it. Work opportunities, which include the sale of rubber, rags, and metal to Mr. Fraber, the junk dealer, increase to a domestic position with the McGarritys for Francie. During the harshest times, Francie supplies the apartment stove with coal and goes to bed early to make the fuel last longer.
After Francie graduates from school, summer finds her happily at work at a clipping bureau, where she learns how to cut out articles for clients. When she is fully briefed on the procedure, she accepts the Oklahoma territory and soon adds Pennsylvania and New York because she is careful in her work. With Francie's advancement to \$25-per-week reader's job, Katie is more respectful of her daughter's talents. The loss of the filing bureau job leads to wartime employment as teletype operator, a job requiring Francie to learn touch typing. Again, she copes well by saving for college, paying carfare, lunch, and clothing, and supporting Katie and Laurie.)
3. How does Johnny's illness and death affect the family?
(Johnny, who demonstrates his addiction to alcohol the day that Francie is born by neglecting the school furnace, battles binge drinking throughout his adult life. He keeps up a semblance of steady work by accepting assignments from the union as a singing waiter and entertainer at banquets. Protracted drinking causes Johnny to lose his connection with the union. He becomes so morose that he can only mope, pity himself, and wish he were a better father and provider. After Francie's fourteenth birthday, in late December, he leaves the house. He is discovered collapsed in a doorway, identified as a Catholic by a lapel pin, and taken to Catholic Hospital. Officer McShane connects the description with his disappearance and identifies him for Katie.
Katie sits by Johnny's bed in his final hours and confronts a hospital administrator who wants to place alcoholism and pneumonia on the certificate as cause of death. The administrator relents and writes only pneumonia in the blank. With that single victory over disgrace, she returns to her family and assumes formal designation as head of household, a title she has held in the background most of her marriage. With insurance money to cover the undertaker and funeral clothing, she feels reasonably sure that she can manage expenses and keep working until the birth of her third child, who is due in May.
As tokens of their father's love, Neeley takes Johnny's signet ring and Francie claims his shaving mug from the barber shop. Francie moves woodenly through the church service and burial, but holds in her grief until her graduation six months later, when the gift of roses opens the dammed up emotion and allows her a catharsis. The family acclimate themselves to loss and refuse charity from Mr. McGarrity. Francie, who must work to keep the family going, mourns Johnny as she realizes that her mother is

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

not so adamant on a high school education as was her father.)

4. What emotions cause Francie great hardship?

(Much of Francie's difficulty in growing up poor and fatherless involves self-imposed mental torment. When her parents quarrel over Johnny's drinking, she withdraws from the sound, which causes her to detest her mother's nagging and to side with Johnny. After Johnny's death, Francie defends him from criticism and regrets his loss. Paramount in her emotional reevaluation of home is the placement of Neeley first in importance. The unfairness of his return to school widens the wedge between Francie and Katie, although Francie's role in Laurie's birth increases the mother-daughter tie.)

Other types of negative emotion assault Francie's self-esteem. She fears that claiming to be named Mary so she can receive a doll for Christmas makes her a liar and beggar. Katie reassures her that her name is really Mary Frances Nolan, a fact which quiets her worries about falsehood. Lack of information about reproduction also worries Francie, who depends on street information and her mother's over-simplification as a means of understanding male/female relationships. Aunt Sissy, who has more first-hand knowledge of sex than Katie, supplies Francie with the finer points of womanhood.)

5. How does Francie assess her growing up years?

(As the Nolans prepare for merger with the McShane family, Francie has reached a higher level of consciousness. She looks back on the old neighborhood and the activities which filled her days in childhood. By observing children collecting for Fraber the junk man, people strolling in the park, the librarian suggesting reading material in the shabby library, and Florry Wendy occupying Francie's favorite post on the fire escape to read and eat candy apart from the squalor of Williamsburg, Francie surveys her own growing up years.)

The neighborhood tree which Francie had once enjoyed stands out as emblematic of her maturity. The tree, which had been cut down and its stump set afire, still flourishes. As Francie admires its foliage, she exults, "It lived! And nothing could destroy it." The thought is solace enough to end her contemplation of Florry, a child at a maturational stage which Francie remembers from her past.)

Questions 6 - 8 Interpretive Level

6. What social structures impinge on the Nolans' lives?

(Much of the Nolans' existence reflects the workings of social structures. Overall, the power of neighborhood gossip and values affects how people behave and how individuals express their approval or disapproval of conduct, such as Johnny's drunkenness and Sissy's numerous liaisons and production of a large, healthy infant from a flat abdomen. Local attitudes toward the sexes arise from neighborhood mores, such as the door by which women may enter the saloon and the time period widows must observe before marrying.)

Foremost among outside forces which affect neighborhood behavior is religion, particularly Catholicism and Judaism. Since most immigrant families appear to belong to one category or the other, the ability to coexist with conflicting cultures and faiths causes neighbors to strive to

understand each other, especially where livelihood demands understanding. Thus, Francie learns the intricacies of dealing with Jewish merchants at the same time that she explores her own feelings about Catholicism, Jesus, and God, whom she blames for taking Johnny from her.)

Schools, which could equalize differences in a multinational community, fail to include all children. A front row of favorites includes mostly American-born children whose parents are natives. Behind the privileged sit Francie and Neeley and other second generation pupils, who receive brutal, negative treatment and refusal of bathroom privileges because they come from less polished homes and backgrounds. Despite the inequities of classes taught by prejudiced teachers, who are themselves newcomers to America, Francie recognizes the importance of learning if she is to avoid the trap which destroys her mother's hands with daily scrubbing of floors to provide her family with a place to live.)

7. How does the author reflect her bias toward Johnny?

(From the beginning, Francie indicates that living in privation is less onerous when she has her father as reward. As she listens to his talk with friends, she acknowledges:

He was a sweet singer of sweet songs . . . His brother waiters really loved him. The men he worked for loved him. His wife and children loved him. He was still gay and young and handsome.

He sings ballads for her, entertains her with bright, cheery banter, compliments her ironing of his apron, and carries her tidbits from the tables of wealthy patrons. By calling her Prima Donna and enrolling her in a better school, he sets her apart from squalor and assures her of his love and support.)

In return for so loving a father, the author rewards Francie with a sense of security when Johnny is stable. The antithesis to these pleasant periods are the bouts of alcoholism, which terrify her with fears for Johnny's welfare. The turning point of the novel is Christmas Day and Johnny's death, which removes the buffer between Francie and Katie and causes Francie to reassess her relationship with her mother. Learning to appreciate pragmatic motherhood, Francie bonds with the third child, named for one of her father's favorite songs. Through Katie's love for the infant, Francie realizes that her parents shared a special relationship and that both she and her mother mourn Johnny's loss.)

8. How does Sissy transcend bias toward women?

(Although uneducated and freighted by the burden of questionable morals and possible bigamy, Sissy copes with local prejudice by manipulating people's attitudes toward her. When the teacher refuses Francie toilet privileges, Sissy intimidates the woman by pointing out a police officer and declaring that he is Sissy's husband. When the children ride another child's bicycle, complaints from the mother fail to deflect the police officer's regard for Sissy's buxom shape. The incident concludes with sympathy toward Aunt Sissy and thus to her niece and nephew, whom the officer claims are only enjoying a brief ride.)

Sissy's most significant victory lies in her acquisition of a child. She sticks to her story that she is pregnant while visiting an Italian girl daily with gifts of food to fatten the

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

girl's developing baby. Against the ignorance and cruelty of a shamed Italian father and cowed mother, Sissy flashes her chicken inspector's badge and insists that Lucia receive decent care and feeding. The girl thrives and produces a healthy daughter, breastfeeds her, and turns over to Sissy the child Sissy had waited for through eleven failed pregnancies. Sissy complements her feat by producing a son at a hospital where a Jewish doctor rescues the blue-skinned infant by providing oxygen shortly after birth.)

Questions 9 and 10 Critical Level

9. What does the novel suggest about poverty?

(There are numerous conclusions readers might draw as to the outcome of so difficult a childhood as Neeley and Francie endure. On the positive side, the children remain close and honor their parents' efforts to provide them with the best that limited means can supply. Both children treasure the good times, especially holidays, and take pride in their efforts to add to the family's income with pennies earned from collecting junk and a free Christmas tree carried home from the tree lot.

On the negative side, Francie learns that male children receive special treatment and that being bright and creative is not enough leverage to keep her in school beyond eighth grade. By observing the lives of Grandma Mary, Aunt Evy, Sissy, Ruthie, and Katie, Francie avoids self-pity or loss of esteem and maintains her private determination to excel and to achieve as a writer. One of many female workers who turn wartime to opportunity, Francie applies ghetto logic to the situation and solicits work at a time when the nation demands willing workers.)

10. What stylistic touches make Smith's novel a classic?

(From the beginning, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn rings true. The details suggest a time and place which Smith knows well. For example, her understanding of the monogrammed shaving cup as a mark of manhood is crucial to Francie's appreciation of her father's dapper ways and his refusal to be beaten down by extenuating circumstances. Another scene which indicates direct knowledge of the situation is her description of Officer McShane's domestic arrangement. Obviously, Smith wrote from personal acquaintance with people who did not demand that life live up to the romantic ideal of boy/girl love, marriage, and family.

The myriad small touches which color every paragraph illustrate the page-per-day method by which Smith wrote the novel. Each scene is lovingly crafted with exact details. Neeley's spats, Francie's black lace underwear, Mr. McGarrity's roll of bills, Officer McShane's cradling of Laurie to his chest, Katie's hands in lye and soda water, Johnny's altered gait when he is under the influence, and Sissy's job in the rubber factory—all attest to Smith's childhood observations and to her ability to tap memory as a source of fiction. Although Francie and Betty Smith are not one and the same, the likelihood that Smith lived Francie's most crucial memories add credence to the story as semi-autobiographical memoir, an eyewitness account of Brooklyn as it was during the first decades of the twentieth century.)

Questions 11-13 Creative Level

11. Compose a conversation with a critic in which you discuss

your response to *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Be specific about your likes and dislikes in reflective literature and your assessment of Francie Nolan as a role model. List detailed scenes you might describe by emulating Betty Smith's style.

12. List and characterize Francie's relationship with peers, relatives, co-workers, boyfriends, tradespeople, and neighbors. Explain her memories of each.
13. Compose an oral report on the causes and outcomes of World War I. Using drawings, slides, or other graphic displays, demonstrate how the war affected civilians like the Nolans.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Math

1. Make a time line from historical references in the book, such as the Irish potato famine, the beginning of World War I, the battle of the Argonne Wood, and Prohibition. Interpose events from Francie's life, particularly her parents' marriage, the birth dates of the Nolan children, graduation, and Johnny's death.
2. Collect lines from the novel which disclose passage of time and the relative ages of the characters. For example, note that Officer McShane is fourteen years older than Katie and that Neeley was born eight days after Francie's first birthday.

Economics and Social Studies

1. Make a weekly budget for the Nolans after Johnny dies. Keep separate income columns for Katie and the children and denote where the money is spent. Explain why going to bed early affects how much is budgeted for coal. Discuss the importance of keeping an insurance policy for the head of household.
2. Explain why Francie's employer is eager to keep her at work. Discuss why young female workers are a savings to the company, especially during wartime. Contrast Francie's employment to that of Katie, who cleans floors in exchange for a place to live.

Psychology

1. Discuss the favoritism of Katie for Neeley and Johnny for Francie. Explain why the children do not resent each other and how Johnny's death realigns family loyalties.
2. Explain what Francie learns about womanhood from a close association with Aunt Sissy, such as why her aunt stops wearing perfume and why all her lovers are named John.

Cinema

1. Make a list of dramatic scenes from the novel which would require intense use of lighting, costume, makeup, music, props, and stunts, particularly the tossing of the Christmas tree, Francie's sobs in the school restroom, the abduction scene, Katie's disposal of the gun, Johnny and Neeley's entrance through the cellar window, and Francie's assistance at Laurie's birth.
2. Contrast the film version of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* with the novel. Explain why the story omits Elizabeth, Ben, Miss Garnder, Lee, Albie, Grandma Mary, Aunt Evy, Ruthie, and Mr. Jenson but highlights the roles of Mr. McGarrity, Officer McShane, and the barber.

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

Health

1. Discuss the connection between acute alcoholism and Johnny's death from pneumonia.
2. Explain why families kept carbolic acid in their medicine cabinets in the early twentieth century.
3. Comment on Katie's belief in the medicinal value of coffee. What ingredients cause immediate affect on the body?

Science

1. Explain the workings of a teletype. Compare the device to a telegraph, a telephone, a photocopier, and a fax machine.
2. Discuss the growth of trees. Explain why Francie's tree continues to produce shoots after the trunk is cut.

Language

1. Create a glossary of slang terms, foreign words, and dialect, such as clappy, goyem, sheeny, El, shanty Irish, straw katy, vici-kid high buttoned shoes, Gentile, oi, *coup de grace*, *heimdickischer*, *schoene*, and *heinie*. Define each term and name its origin.
2. Using examples from the novel, compose an extended definition of underprivileged.
3. Make a list of sense images under the headings of sound, touch, sight, smell, and taste. For example, "Her hands were beautiful and quick with a bit of chalk or a stick of charcoal," "The garments had frozen into grotesque shapes and didn't want to come in through the window," and "There was a gas heater which hissed companionably."

Art and Music

1. Use a computer to create memorials to Andy and Johnny Nolan, Molly McShane, and Grandmother Mary, a World War I recruitment poster, a bakery or butcher shop price list, a union label, an invitation to the eighth grade graduation, Tammany Hall campaign literature, and a brochure of hospital rules.
2. Pantomime songs popular during World War I, such as "K-K-K-Katy," "Over There," "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier," "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy," and "The Rose of No Man's Land." Contrast the focus of the lyrics with favorite Irish melodies, such as "Mother Machree," "Molly Malone," and "Annie Laurie."

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Compose a theme describing the expectations and opportunities for women like Lucia, Aunt Sissy, Aunt Evy, Grandmother Mary, Katie, Molly, Florry Wendy, Ruthie Nolan, and Francie. Explain why college is essential to Francie's escape from the slums.
2. Lead a discussion of parental responsibilities. Determine what Francie, Neeley, and their sister and cousins gain from the discipline, example, and love of Ruthie, Grandmother Mary, Grandfather Rommely, Johnny, Katie, Aunt Sissy, and Steve.
3. Relate the following literary terms to *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*: literary foils, denouement, dramatic irony, symbol, simile, lyrics, flat and round characters, stereotyping, romantic conventions, internal monologue, controlling metaphor, scenario, epistle, dialogue, caesura, dialect, and flashback.

4. Contrast the men who influence Francie's life, particularly the pervert, Ben, Johnny, Officer McShane, Mr. McGarrity, Steve, her employers, Mr. Jenson, Lee, Neeley, and Grandfather Rommely.
5. Write a minor character's diary entry on significant days, particularly the priest who influences the hospital administrator to leave alcoholism off the death certificate, the librarian who tells Francie about the brown container, Lucia, Lucia's father, or Steve on the day of Sarah's birth, the Polish neighbor on the day Laurie is born, and Florry Wendy the day Francie says goodbye to the neighborhood.
6. Respond to Francie concerning her application to college. Explain why a high school diploma is required of most students. Discuss ways that she can use the library to overcome her educational lapses.
7. Write a chapter describing Katie's wedding. Project how the Nolan family will honor Johnny's memory after Officer McShane heads the household and adopts Laurie.
8. Create a discussion among neighbors after the Nolan family moves away. Note their admiration for Katie as single parent and provider and for the children for completing their education. Include mention of Johnny as singing waiter and father.

ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. List significant events in the Nolan family history, such as the arrival of Johnny's parents from Ireland, deaths of Johnny's brothers, Francie's graduation from eighth grade, Laurie's birth after Johnny's death from pneumonia, and Neeley's job as a brokerage house errand boy.
2. Make a list of scenes from the novel which express contrasting attitudes toward escape, loyalty, sexuality, religion, friendship, self-esteem, loss, responsibility, and compromise. Next to each, indicate what you think is the author's personal philosophy.
3. Compose brief definitions of sex discrimination and frustration as they apply to Katie.
4. List examples of love, commitment, and unity in the Nolan family.

SMITH'S PUBLISHED WORKS

- A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (semi-autobiographical novel, 1943)
The Boy Abe (one-act play, 1944)
Tomorrow Will Be Better (novel, 1948)
A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (musical drama, 1951)
Maggie-Now (novel, 1958)
Joy in the Morning (semi-autobiographical novel, 1963)

RELATED READING

- Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*
Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie*
William Faulkner's "Two Soldiers"
Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*
Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*
Carson McCuller's *A Member of the Wedding* and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*
O'Henry's "The Gift of the Magi"
Robert Newton Peck's *A Day No Pigs Would Die*
Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

John van Druten's *I Remember Mama*
Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*
Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*
Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Buck, Claire, ed. *The Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1992.
Contemporary Authors, Vols. 33-36. Detroit: Gale, 1978.
Current Biography. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1943, 1972.
Ehrlich, Eugene, and Gorton Carruth. *The Oxford Illustrated Literary Guide to the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.
Kunitz, Stanley J., ed. *Twentieth Century Authors*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1955.
Perkins, George, et al., eds. *Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.

A TREES GROWS IN BROOKLYN

VOCABULARY TEST

Select synonyms from the list that follows for the underlined words below. Place your choices in the blanks. You will have answers left over when you finish.

aped
brooding
brutalizing
burnished
corporal

dubious
duplicated
flay
homage
impious

manipulator
monitor
operatic
passable
prohibition

recalcitrant
scapegoat
sordidly
spleen
tormented

It would seem as if all the unwanted children would stick together and be one against the things that were against them. But not so. They hated each other as much as the teacher hated them. They mimicked (1) _____ teacher's snarling manner when they spoke to each other.

There was always one unfortunate whom the teacher singled out and used for a victim (2) _____. This poor child was the nagged one, the tortured (3) _____ one, the one on whom she vented her spinsterly spite (4) _____. As soon as a child received this questionable (5) _____ recognition, the other children turned on him and repeated (6) _____ the teacher's torments. Characteristically, they fawned on those close to teacher's heart. Maybe they figured they were nearer to the throne that way.

Three thousand children crowded into this ugly barbarous (7) _____ school that had facilities for only one thousand. Dirty stories went the rounds of the children. One of them was that Miss Pfeiffer, a bleached blond teacher with a high giggle, went down to the basement to sleep with the assistant janitor those times when she put a watcher (8) _____ in charge and explained that she had to "step out to the office." Another, passed around by little boys who had been victims, was that the lady principal, a hard-bitten, heavy, cruel woman of middle years who wore sequin-decorated dresses and smelled always of raw gin, got undisciplined (9) _____ boys into her office and made them take down their pants so that she could lacerate (10) _____ their naked buttocks with a rattan cane.

Of course, physical (11) _____ punishment was forbidden in the schools. But who, outside, knew? Who would tell? Not the whipped children, certainly. It was a tradition in the neighborhood that if a child reported that he had been whipped in school, he would receive a second home-whipping because he had not behaved in school. So the child took his punishment and kept quiet, leaving well enough alone.

The ugliest thing about these stories was that they were all degradingly (12) _____ true.

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Character Identification (30 points)

Identify the characters described below.

- _____ 1. marries Molly to spare her shame and fathers fourteen children.
- _____ 2. is condemned to bread and water for conceiving a child by a married man.
- _____ 3. marries Leo before he leaves for war.
- _____ 4. rejects his grandchildren and despises their Irish father.
- _____ 5. calls his child Prima Donna and treats her like a princess.
- _____ 6. conceals Johnny's saloon debt from Katy.
- _____ 7. hands Francie a book each Saturday without looking at her.
- _____ 8. touches his penis to Francie's leg and holds his hand over her mouth.
- _____ 9. shoots the pervert who murdered a little girl.
- _____ 10. dumps the soap out of Johnny's shaving cup before giving it to Francie.
- _____ 11. spends the night comforting Johnny and helping him overcome the DTs.
- _____ 12. refuses to be called John.
- _____ 13. helps Francie learn chemistry.
- _____ 14. sits on the fire escape and reads as Francie used to.
- _____ 15. is ridiculed for wearing spats to mass.

Part II: Quotation identification (20 points)

Beside each quotation place the name of the speaker (a) and the person being addressed (b).

- _____ 1a. Here, you're writing that you're very hungry. Only you're writing it in a twisted round-about
- _____ 1b. way.

- _____ 2a. Who's joining the navy?
- _____ 2b.

- _____ 3a. But do you know . . . that there are some people who talk about me and call *me* a bad
- _____ 3b. woman?

- _____ 4a. It's more than anyone else is getting . . . and if they found out . . . You understand? No
- _____ 4b. washroom gossip.

- _____ 5a. It's not my gun . . . I found it.
- _____ 5b.

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if any part is false.

- _____ 1. Johnny regrets that he didn't kill the pervert who grabbed his daughter.
- _____ 2. Katie is proud to tip the soda shop waiter on her children's graduation day.
- _____ 3. Katie implies that Steve is the married man who fathered Lucia's daughter.
- _____ 4. Francie's filing job ends after World War I begins.
- _____ 5. Miss Garnder recognizes Francie's writing talent and encourages her to compose fiction.
- _____ 6. Before moving to a new home, Francie happily tears up her tattered library card because she won't need it in the new neighborhood.
- _____ 7. Lee knows more about French than Francie, but less about restoration drama.
- _____ 8. Francie fears that continuing to scrub floors will cause Katie's child to be born crooked.
- _____ 9. The insurance policy covers undertaker's fee, burial, and clothing for the Nolan family.
- _____ 10. Mr. McGarrity enjoys talking about Ireland with Katie and asks if he can return to visit her.

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answer any TWO in complete sentences.

1. Contrast Neeley and Francie and their relationship with their parents.

2. Explain how Francie and Neeley supplement Katie's income.

3. Analyze the loss of Johnny to the family.

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Underline an answer to complete each statement below.

1. Laurie gets her name from (her father, Thomas Rommely, an Irish song, the midwife who delivers her).
2. Francie is disappointed that (Neeley gets his own room, Albie wants to take her to a movie, the priest insists that the certificate give alcoholism as cause of death, Elizabeth knows Lee deceived Francie).
3. The job as city reader (causes Francie to quit night school, pays twenty dollars a week, once belonged to a German spy who was caught on the job, requires skill on the teletype machine).
4. When Johnny is drinking, (Francie sings louder to drown out arguments, he sleeps in doorways instead of coming home, Katie locks him out of the house, he grows more thoughtful).
5. At confirmation, (Neeley takes his father's name, Francie carries red roses from Papa, Aunt Sissy treats the children to a strawberry soda, Katie wears her new moss green hat).
6. Ben encourages Francie to (study chemistry and Restoration drama, come to Ann Arbor, write to Mrs. Elizabeth Rhynor, write to him every day).
7. When she tries to picture the Virgin Mary, Francie thinks of (Katie, Grandma Mary, Miss Garnder, Aunt Evy).
8. Johnny is proud to think of (a mayor from Brooklyn, his children preparing meals for McGarrity, how he left his janitor's job, people laughing as he sings for banquets).
9. When the Nolans return from the cemetery, they find (Sissy hanging curtains made from a dress, Steve holding Sarah, heaps of bologna, a gun in the washtub).
10. Katie gets by until Laurie's birth by (marrying Officer McShane, accepting money from McGarrity, letting Neeley quit school and run errands, cashing insurance policies).

Part II: Identification (20 points)

Place an X by any statement that is true of Francie.

- _____ 1. is cold in black lace underwear.
- _____ 2. finishes mopping floors when Katie goes into labor.
- _____ 3. receives ten gilded pennies for Christmas.
- _____ 4. reads aloud from Shakespeare and the Bible.
- _____ 5. is not allowed to use the washroom at the clipping bureau.
- _____ 6. is momentarily frozen with fear of her abductor.
- _____ 7. says goodbye to the tree stump and to Mr. McGarrity before moving to a new home.
- _____ 8. drags the Christmas tree home as a gift to her parents and Neeley.
- _____ 9. passes her college entrance examinations.
- _____ 10. weeps for her father six months after his death.

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

ANSWER KEY

Vocabulary Test

- | | |
|---------------|-----------------|
| 1. aped | 7. brutalizing |
| 2. scapegoat | 8. moniter |
| 3. tormented | 9. recalcitrant |
| 4. spleen | 10. flay |
| 5. dubious | 11. corporal |
| 6. duplicated | 12. sordidly |

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Character Identification (30 points)

- | | |
|--------------------|------------|
| 1. McShane | 9. Katy |
| 2. Lucia | 10. barber |
| 3. Elizabeth | 11. Sissy |
| 4. Grandpa Rommely | 12. Steve |
| 5. Johnny | 13. Ben |
| 6. McGarrity | 14. Florry |
| 7. librarian | 15. Neeley |
| 8. murderer | |

Part II: Quotation Identification (20 points)

- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| 1a. Francie | 4a. boss |
| 1b. herself | 4b. Francie |
| 2a. Katie | 5a. Johnny |
| 2b. Neeley | 5b. cop |
| 3a. Sissy | |
| 3b. Katie | |

Part III: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. F |
| 2. T | 7. F |
| 3. T | 8. T |
| 4. T | 9. F |
| 5. F | 10. T |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

1. a song
2. Neeley gets his own room
3. pays twenty dollars a week
4. he grows more thoughtful
5. Neeley takes his father's name
6. come to Ann Arbor
7. Grandma Mary
8. a mayor from Brooklyn
9. heaps of bologna
10. cashing insurance policies

Part II: Identification (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. X | 6. X |
| 2. | 7. |
| 3. X | 8. |
| 4. X | 9. |
| 5. | 10. X |

Part III: Completion (20 points)

- | | |
|--------------|------------------|
| 1. Purgatory | 6. Johnny |
| 2. park | 7. Michigan |
| 3. Austria | 8. Oklahoma |
| 4. precinct | 9. Andy |
| 5. McShane | 10. Williamsburg |

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

TEACHER'S NOTES



Vandalia Road • Jacksonville, Illinois 62650
Toll free 1-800-637-6581 • Fax 1-800-551-1169
PERMA-BOUND CANADA • Box 517, Station A • Willowdale, Ontario M2N 5T1
Toll free 1-800-461-1999 • Fax 1-705-876-9703