



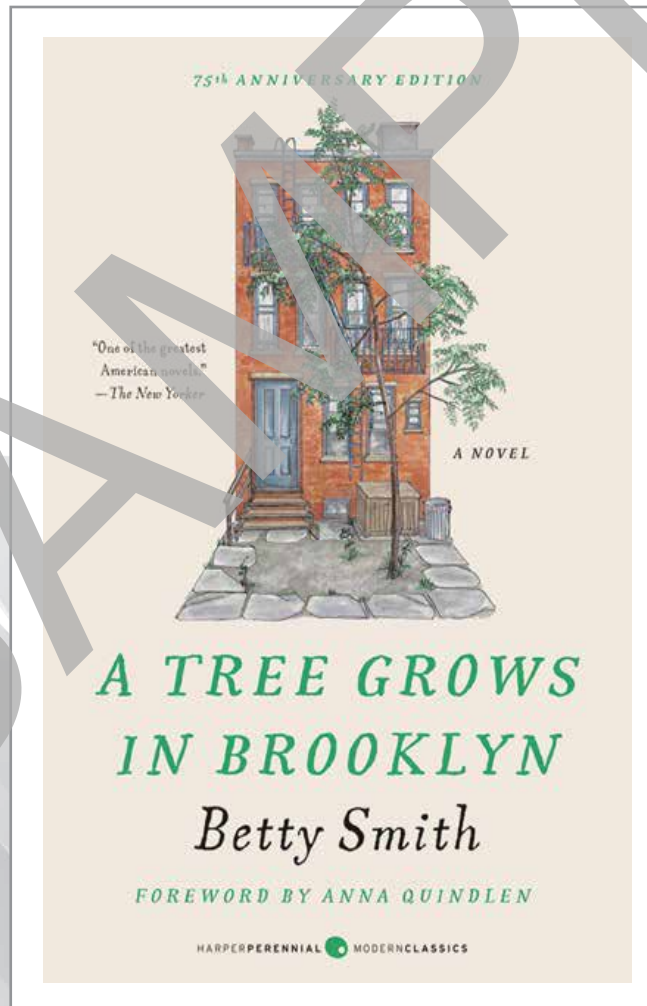
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

Betty Smith



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

Betty Smith

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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3901 Union Blvd., Suite 155

St. Louis, MO 63115

sales@novelunits.com

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Skills and Strategies

Thinking

Brainstorming, analyzing, compare/contrast, research, critical thinking

Comprehension

Cause/effect, inferring, plot development, predicting, thematic development

Literary Elements

Similes, metaphors, allusions, personification, conflict, symbolism, foreshadowing, irony, characterization, setting, theme, genre, sequence, analogy, universality, oxymoron, pun

Writing

Essay, poetry, eulogy, TV script, newspaper article, sequel

Vocabulary

Target words, definitions, applications

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, oral reports

Across the Curriculum

Art—montage, sketch;
Music—appropriate selections; Current Events—magazine and newspaper articles

Genre: fiction

Setting: Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York; 1900–1918

Point of View: third-person omniscient

Themes: family, love, hope, perseverance, maturation, loss of innocence, value of education

Conflict: person vs. society (class structure, poverty), person vs. person, person vs. self

Tone: optimistic, empathetic

Date of First Publication: 1943; Harper & Brothers, Publishers

Summary

Francie Nolan “comes of age” in the poverty-stricken Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn in the early 1900s. Her father and mother, Johnny and Katie, marry young. In less than two years, their family expands with the birth of Francie and her younger brother, Neeley. Francie adores her father, an alcoholic who works only sporadically as a singing waiter. From him, she acquires a passion for the beautiful things in life. From her mother, who works as a janitress to provide most of the family’s needs, she learns the value of hard work.

The family struggles to make ends meet, and this struggle intensifies when Johnny dies in his early 30s. Francie is forced to grow up quickly, but she remains loyal to her family and focused on furthering her education. As she matures, Francie develops a strong work ethic, encounters prejudice and a sexual predator, and suffers a broken heart when she falls in love with and is jilted by an engaged soldier. As the novel ends, Francie’s mother once again finds love—this time with the kind-hearted and wealthy Michael McShane. The Nolans move out of their run-down neighborhood, and Francie prepares to depart for the University of Michigan.

About the Author

Personal: Betty Smith was born Elisabeth Wehner on December 15, 1896, in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. The daughter of German immigrants, she left school after graduating from the eighth grade and began working in a factory. She married George Smith in 1919, and the couple lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where George pursued a law degree at the University of Michigan. They had two daughters, Nancy and Mary. Betty and George were divorced in 1938. She moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where she married Joe Jones in 1943. Betty Smith died in 1972.

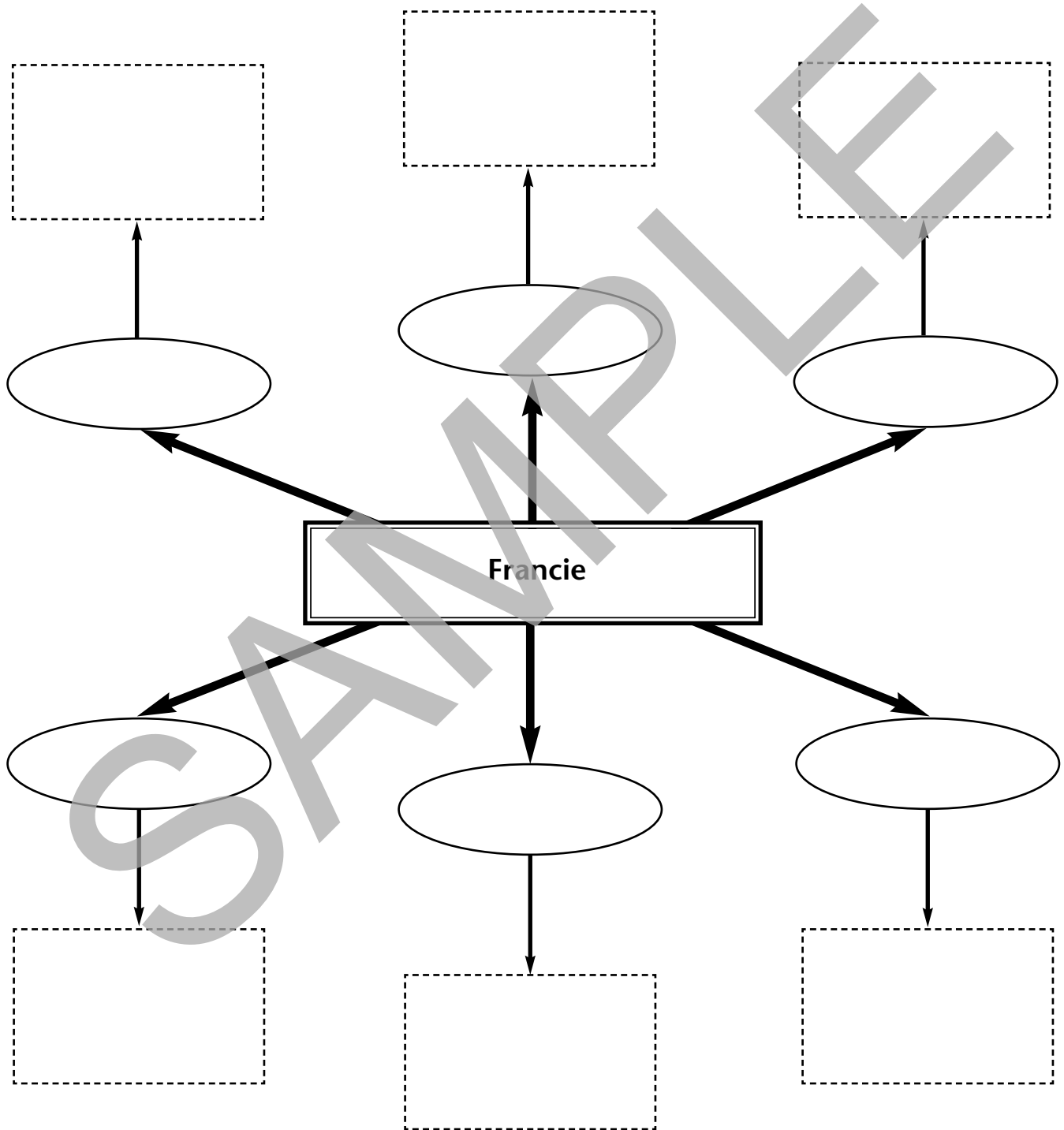
Education: Smith attended the University of Michigan. She studied journalism, drama, writing, and literature. She later attended Yale Drama School and the University of North Carolina, where Betty studied playwriting.

Career: Early in her career, Smith wrote feature articles for several magazines and newspapers. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943) was her first novel. It received critical acclaim and achieved bestseller status. She later wrote three other novels: *Tomorrow Will Be Better* (1947), *Maggie-Now* (1958), and *Joy in the Morning* (1963). In addition to her success as a novelist, she authored over 30 plays.

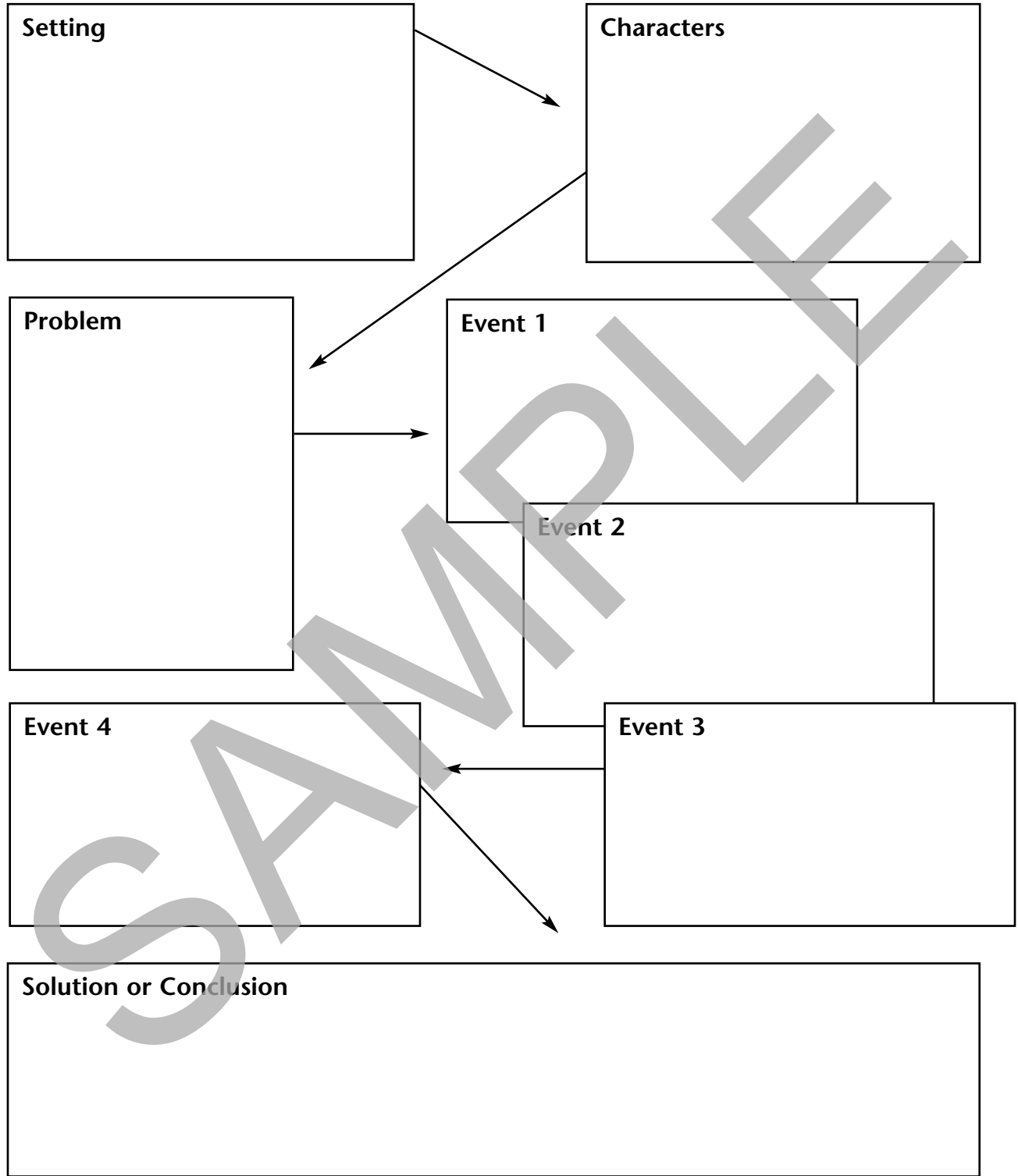
Honors: Rockefeller Fellowship, Dramatists Guild Fellowship, Avery Hopkins Award for drama

Characterization

Directions: In each oval, write an adjective that describes Francie's personality. Then fill in each dotted rectangle with a detail about Francie that illustrates that part of her personality.



Story Map



Book One: Chapters 1–3, pp. 5–38

Francie and Neeley Nolan typify poor children in Brooklyn in the early 1900s. Their mother, Katie, works as a janitress and provides most of the family's income. Their father, Johnny, is an alcoholic who works sporadically as a singing waiter. Francie is happy and contented. She reads avidly and loves her father unconditionally.

Vocabulary
serene (5)
somber (5)
ragamuffins (7)
inveigled (10)
Messiah (12)
tenement (12)
coup de grace (29)
placidly (34)

Discussion Questions

1. Examine the indications of poverty in Williamsburg. Discuss the significance of the setting, noting the contrasting meanings of “serene” and “somber” (p. 5). *(Children sell junk and are allowed to spend half their pennies for treats but must take the other half home to their parents, who work at low-paying jobs and struggle to pay the rent and feed their families. Indications of poverty include the variety of ways Katie knows how to prepare stale bread and Francie’s feeling of empowerment when she has a nickel to spend. Other indications of poverty include the old, shabby library and the residents’ need to pawn items such as the man’s suit each Monday and redeem it on Saturday for church on Sunday. The setting is the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn in the early 1900s. The*

neighborhood is mostly made up of immigrants who came to the United States for a better life. Their daily lives are interwoven, as individuals and families struggle to survive in impoverished circumstances. In the novel, evidence of racial bias exists [e.g., the bullies who threaten the Jewish boy], just as it actually did during this era. To the more affluent observer, the neighborhood would appear dull and dismal [i.e., “somber”], but to Francie and other residents, it is calm and peaceful [i.e., “serene”], especially on Saturdays. The serenity of life is in the people who live there, not in their surroundings. The neighborhood and its people help mold Francie into the person she becomes. pp. 5–26)

2. Examine information about the Tree of Heaven. Discuss how this tree is a metaphor for Francie Nolan’s life. *(This tree survives in the Nolans’ yard. As Francie sits on the fire escape and reads each Saturday, she imagines she is living in a tree, hidden from the world by its branches. The Tree of Heaven flourishes in the bleak surroundings, and regardless of how often it is cut down, it always grows back stronger than ever. Thus the tree becomes a metaphor for Francie’s life. Regardless of how many hardships she must face and how many times adverse circumstances thwart her progress, she is a survivor who will thrive and grow strong. The tree symbolizes hope in the midst of poverty and foreshadows Francie’s ability to grow strong physically and mentally in spite of hardship. p. 6)*
3. Discuss how Francie and Neeley spend their Saturdays and examine the importance of Carney’s to them. *(Their Saturdays begin with a trip to Carney, who pays them pennies for the junk they have accumulated through the week. They are allowed to spend half their earnings but must put the other half in the family’s tin-can bank. Neeley spends his money at Cheap Charlie’s candy store. Francie sometimes spends her pennies at Gimpy’s candy store and occasionally goes to the nickel-and-dime store on Broadway. Francie and Neeley shop for stale bread, a bit of meat, and a few vegetables. Neeley spends the rest of the day playing ball with his friends. Francie gets books from the library and spends the afternoon reading. pp. 6–26)*
4. Analyze information about Francie’s parents, Katie and Johnny Nolan. Note how Katie feels about wasting something once in a while. Do you agree with Katie’s rationale? *(At the beginning of the novel, Katie is 29, pretty, small, and vibrant. She supplies most of the family’s*

finances by working as a janitress. Johnny is a handsome and lovable freelance singing waiter, but he is an alcoholic without steady work. The family's one great luxury is coffee, and each family member is allowed three cups a day with milk. Francie, who would rather smell the coffee than drink it, often pours hers out at the end of the meal. Katie believes Francie is entitled to do what she wants to with her coffee and thinks it is beneficial to allow her to waste something once in a while. Francie feels richer than anyone in Williamsburg because she has something to waste. Answers will vary. pp. 12–15)

5. Analyze Francie's reaction to the old man outside the bakery. What does this reveal about her? (This scene serves as a reflection on the fragility of life. As Francie watches the old, toothless, dirty man, she imagines what his life was like as a child. She visualizes him as a sweet, much-loved baby, a boy much like Neeley, a handsome young man, and a wonderful husband and father. Now, she believes no one wants him anymore and that his family wants him to die. Francie is a sensitive, empathetic child, and she becomes frightened when she realizes that she, like everyone else, is destined to die. pp. 16–17)
6. Examine the importance of the library and of reading to Francie. What do you think of Francie's "reading plan"? (Francie is an avid reader who reads anything she can find and often rereads a book many times. She loves the library and feels as good about it as she does about church. She has no money to buy a book of her own, but the library enables her to read as much as she wants. She plans to read a book a day in alphabetical order, without skipping a single book. Only on Saturday does she allow herself to deviate from this plan. The jug of seasonal flowers appeals to her love of beauty, and she allows herself to dream about the home she will have someday and all the books with which she will fill it. Her one regret in the library is that the librarian, whom Francie would love to adore, never looks into a child's face. Answers will vary. pp. 22–26)
7. Analyze characteristics of Johnny and the relationship he and Francie share. (He is young and handsome. Although he loves Katie and his children, the responsibilities of a family overwhelm him, and he dreams of a better life. He does not feel he is good enough for his family and is saddened by poverty's effects on them. He attributes his drinking to his lack of education and opportunities for success, which caused him to drift into intermittent work as a singing waiter. When he comes home from a job, he always sings "Molly Malone" as he comes up the stairs, and he enjoys telling his family about his night. He is proud to be a member of the Waiters' Union, and the men at the Union headquarters love him. He has a premonition that he will die young. He shares his thoughts and dreams with Francie, who adores him and feels closer to him than to Katie. There is a part of Francie that loves to dream, too, and she likes that he has leisure time to spend with her. She is proud of her handsome, talented father. pp. 31–38)
8. Analyze the significance of Johnny's pearl studs and his gold collar button. (The pearl studs and gold collar button symbolize [1] a happier past, when Johnny was young and carefree, and [2] his hope for an easier future for his family. The Nolans never pawn either the studs or the collar button, regardless of how much they need money. The studs were Katie's wedding gift to him and cost her a month's salary, and Johnny is very proud of them. The gold collar button was a gift from Hildy O'Dair, the young lady whom he was dating when he met Katie. p. 37)
9. **Prediction:** Will Johnny ever find financial and emotional stability?

Supplementary Activities

1. Write a metaphor poem comparing yourself to one thing or event in your life.

2. Begin a list of similes and metaphors and add to the list as you read. You may also include allusions, oxymorons, puns, and personification in your list. **Similes**—“pines and the hemlocks...stand like Druids of eld” (p. 5); “a tree...looked like a lot of opened green umbrellas” (p. 6); “laughter sounded like the bleating of lost little lambs” (p. 8); “day...like somebody giving you a present” (p. 32); “[Union] label...like an ornament, like a rose” (p. 32); **Allusion**—Little Boy Blue’s toy dog and tin soldier (p. 10): from Eugene Field’s poem “Little Boy Blue”

Book One: Chapters 4–6, pp. 39–54

Francie faces the impending death of her friend, Henny Gaddis. She adores her Aunt Sissy, who has been married three times and has borne ten children who died soon after birth. Francie and Neeley read a page from both the Bible and Shakespeare each night.

Vocabulary

consumption (39)
pulp magazine (43)
patriarch (45)
goyem (45)
genuflected (49)
aristocratic (53)

Discussion Questions

- Discuss the importance of Flossie and Henny Gaddis. Analyze the significance of Flossie’s costumes and note the foreshadowing of death. *(Flossie represents the young person Francie will become. Flossie works in a factory to support her mother and brother, but she also has a social life, as evidenced by the innovative costumes she designs for the masquerade balls. She is in love with Frank. Francie will one day work in a factory, will enjoy social contacts, and will fall in love. Henny represents the fragility of life. He is doomed to die young from consumption, i.e., tuberculosis. While Francie is admiring Flossie’s costumes, she senses the presence of death; this foreshadows Henny’s destiny to die young. pp. 39–41)*
- Examine the information about Sissy, noting the line that implies the type of job she has. *(Sissy, who is Francie’s favorite aunt, makes everything fun and glamorous when she is around. She is 35 years old, has been married three times, and has given birth to ten children who died soon after birth. She is wild where men are concerned. She treats children as important human beings, and Francie feels that she understands her much better than Katie does. Sissy’s husband works for a pulp magazine publisher, and she brings copies to Francie each month. She works in a rubber factory that produces a few rubber toys as a cover for its actual purpose, making condoms [i.e., “... rubber articles which were bought in whispers”]. pp. 42–43)*
- Discuss the effects of poverty on the Nolan family. *(They practically live on stale bread, from which Katie has become quite innovative at preparing delicious food. Katie supplements the bread with condensed milk and coffee, onions, potatoes, and an occasional banana. They have other fruit only at Christmas. Katie adds meat [a soup bone and ground steak] to their diet only on Saturday. Katie carefully instructs the children, who are responsible for purchasing the family’s food, how to shop frugally. Occasionally, Johnny brings leftovers from a party where he has worked, and the family has a “feast” of rich food. They are so hungry that they eat everything, regardless of how it tastes to them. pp. 43–48, 52)*
- Compare/contrast Willie Flittman and Johnny Nolan, noting the information about their marriages. *(Both are “weak” men who consider themselves to be failures. Willie works steadily but thinks Evy no longer loves him and has no use for him. His children do not respect him, and he believes that even his horse, Drummer, hates him. Everyone at work laughs at him. Johnny works sporadically but never questions Katie’s love. His children respect him, and his fellow union workers love him. Willie endures life; Johnny relishes life. The Flittmans’ lack of communication sharply*