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The Garden of Growing Up

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“Some people called it the Tree of Heaven. No matter where its seed fell, it made a tree which struggled to reach the sky...that's what kind of tree it was” (Smith 4). Much like the tree in the opening scene of Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, protagonist Francie Nolan struggles to reach blossoming adulthood despite her turbulent adolescence and poverty-stricken household. Francie's maturation can be accurately compared to various psychological theories and ideas in order to gain a full understanding of the story. This novel provides ample material for psychological examination and exploration of child development, and understanding this psychological undercurrent is vital to effectively understanding the novel.

In order to examine the changes that Francie undergoes over the course of the novel, it is important to understand how she acts as a child. Francie initially has a narrow view of the world in which she lives. When the whole country goes out to vote in the elections, Francie clearly exhibits psychology's egocentrism by saying, “Maybe people voted in other parts of the country too, but it couldn't be the way it was in Brooklyn” (Smith 224). Egocentrism is a “child's inability to see a situation from another person's point of view. According to [Psychologist Jean] Piaget, the egocentric child assumes that other people see, hear, and feel exactly the same as the child does” (McLeod). Egocentrism is a self-centered way of viewing the world because a child has not developed higher cognition or gathered enough experiences to know any better (Hall); Because Francie's world only consists of a small number of experiences, she is not concerned about the voting habits of America, and even less about her family background, economic status or appearance. In her Brooklyn neighborhood of Williamsburg, there are sections that are dominated by various ethnic groups. Francie knows that Jewish swearing is more a part of their dialect than an expression of hate, but this trait does not irrefutably distinguish them from her in

her mind. She recognizes that there is a vague difference in the way that society treats these peoples, but she herself does not see any discontinuities between herself and any other person in regard to ethnicity. She has the same uninformed conceptions about gender; she knows that there is a difference between boys and girls because boys are allowed to go into Cheap Charlie's candy shop and girls are not. But that is the extent of gender's division in Francie's mind. There are also a variety of economic classes in Francie's area of Brooklyn. The neighborhood where Francie lives is exceptionally poor, with her family and most other families living day to day on only a dollar or two. However, Brooklyn is separated from Manhattan, a town that Francie idealizes in her late-night fantasies into being the pinnacle of beauty and comfort, by Williamsburg Bridge, another object of Francie's imagination. Although her poverty is contrasted in her daily life to extreme wealth, she takes this as a pre-determined and permanent fact and exhibits egocentrism again by never being envious of others. Even when her family has next to nothing for dinner, Francie does not complain because she has no reason to. She does not know any other life, and she cannot imagine her life any other way. This unconcern that Francie portrays of her ethnicity and economic status point to her naive, narrow world. She is a child.

But perhaps the most striking example of Francie's childness is her blatantly carefree manner about the appearance of herself and the appearance of those around her. Instead of being worried about how she is perceived in society, Francie is interested in reading, in her father, in shiny pennies and in sweet treats. Her main thoughts are fleeting, childlike concerns because she has no concept of society or judgement. Before Francie and her brother start school, they have to get vaccinated; after a long afternoon creating mud pies, the children lose track of time and are forced to go to the clinic muddy in order to get there before it closes (Smith 182). The children

feel guilty because Mama told them to wash up before they left, but they don't care about how they look. Their guilt comes solely from their disobedience to their authority figure. The doctor observes and openly disapproves of the children's hygiene level, commenting on the filth of the poor (Smith 183); yet, the children themselves do not care because they are too young to know what hygiene is or to see the harm in being so dirty in a public clinic. And it is not just uncleanliness that Francie does not recognize. She senses that people look down on her family, even though she can't understand why. Even at school, her peers and teachers treated her differently.

Dimly, Francie felt that it wasn't all her fault [that she didn't fit in]. It had something to do with Aunt Sissy who came to the house so often, the way Sissy looked and the way that men in the neighborhood looked after Sissy when she passed. It had something to do with the way Papa couldn't walk straight sometimes and walked sideways down the street when he came home. (Smith 138-139)

Her aunt is promiscuous and her father is an alcoholic, but Francie does not know or care that society has deemed these traits as wrong; she only sees how loving and nurturing her aunt is and how jovial and spirited her father is. She only sees this because of her child-like mind. She does not understand how society dooms these traits that her family exhibits. She has not had enough experiences as a human being to be aware of societal norms because her years are limited.

However, as she ages and matures, Francie's conscientiousness evolves also.

Over the course of the novel, not only does Francie's understanding of society develop, but Francie herself changes from a naive little girl into a fully-fledged woman. This processes of germination is spread throughout the novel, and can be seen specifically in a few instances:

Francie, who *knew* Mama was always right, found out that she was wrong once in a while. She discovered that some of the things she loved so much in her father were considered very comical to other people...Francie was in a panic. Her world was slipping away from her and what would take its place?...Nothing was changing. *She was the one who was changing.* (Smith 272-274)

This changing world of hers brings enlightenment to some of Francie's childish thoughts and perceptions. For the first time she understands why people treat her sexually-active aunt as an outcast. She sees a young, unmarried woman stoned by the other neighborhood women for having sex out of wedlock and "parading" her child for the world to see (Smith 295). The very people whom Francie used to watch from her window and idealize as a child now become ugly and cruel the more she begins to understand, and "It was the first of many disillusionments that were to come as the capacity to feel things grew" (Smith 162). When Francie goes to school, the teachers openly and shamelessly favor the rich students and barely even address the poor students who are crammed two to a desk in the back of the classrooms. Because of this ad hoc segregation, Francie realizes that there is a difference between her and some of her peers; she realizes that she is dirty and poor without the new toys and beautiful dresses of her classmates, and she becomes ashamed. However, soon after her brief feelings of humility, Francie comes to the mature conclusion that "There had to be the dark and muddy waters so that the sun could have something to background its flashing glory" (Smith 207). This informed, selfless conclusion shows that Francie has reached Psychologist Erik Erikson's Formal Operational Stage of Development because she is able to apply the use of logic and reasoning to the abstract

(Hall). Francie can justify her teachers' behaviors with the use of a metaphor. However, this development causes as much grief for Francie as it does relief because,

The pressures of survival become more psychosocially bound [when a child grows up]. Where [they] were once confronted by physical threats, these have transformed themselves into social and emotional threats. The wiring for avoiding the physical threat, however, is what remains in place and largely drives [their] reaction to being 'left out', 'pushed out' or not accepted, both by the group and by [their] individual love interests.

(Formica)

Although Francie does not have any love interests at this time, she does feel the emotional threats from both her teachers and the rich children in her class; she feels left out and educationally abandoned. This social jilting is merely one of many complicated frustrations that Francie finds escorting her into adolescence.

Part of Francie's chaotic launch into maturation is the backwards way that she has been independent thus far. Adolescents are, "...capable of reproduction and so are physiologically mature. Yet, they have not achieved the emotional and economic independence from their parents that are the hallmarks of adulthood" (Weiten 449). Francie enters into adolescence awkwardly because she is not physiologically mature yet, but she has been earning an income for years, and therefore she has been economically independent from her parents for years; this is a strange and stressful way of entering into adolescence as a typical girl would be physically developed but not emotionally or economically independent (Hall). However, this inversion does not hinder her from her full development.

Perhaps the most blatant expression of Francie's maturation is the introduction of the concept of sex in her life. The desire for and curiosity about sex, and therefore reproduction, is a basic biological instinct that presents itself when the capacity for reproduction is available, during and after puberty. Francie does not see boys as only different from girls because they may enter Cheap Charlie's candy shop anymore; she sees them as potential soul mates, as potential lovers. She begins to crave not the deep, yet platonic love of her mother and siblings, but the romantic love that only a man can provide. One lonely night, she desperately thinks, "I need someone...I need someone. I need to hold somebody close...I love Mama and Neeley and Laurie. But I need someone to love in a different way from the way I love them'" (Smith 509). She meets a soldier when she is 16 years old, and they spend a few days together before he is deployed. On the soldier's last night in town, confident that he has won her heart, he asks her to spend the night with him; she is simultaneously appalled and intrigued. She refuses, and her dreams about her future life with him are maliciously slaughtered when he immediately returns to his previously unknown fiancee; Francie is internally scarred by the deep love she thought she had for him which was in no way reciprocated (Smith 582). This form of sexual craving is not love but,

Emotional hunger....It is a strong emotional need caused by deprivation in childhood. It is a primitive condition of pain and longing which people often act out in a desperate attempt to fill a void or emptiness. This emptiness is related to the pain of aloneness and separateness and can never realistically be fully satisfied in an adult relationship.

(Firestone)

She recognizes her incredibly desperate attempt at finding love and does not repeat that mistake when she meets a second potential soul mate, Ben, who had to move out of Brooklyn for college. One night she begins to retrace her desolate steps: "She wrote: Dear Ben: you said I was to write if ever I needed you. So I'm writing...She tore the sheet in half. 'No! I don't want to need anybody. I want someone to need *me*... *I want someone to need me*'" (Smith 586). The emotion that she felt for the soldier was not love. It was unsure, passionate, and fleeting. With Ben, however, Francie explores her feelings in depth before she pursues him so they can continue to build their lasting relationship with sturdy, deliberate bricks. It is at this point that Francie has truly grown up. She is a true woman now. She is economically, physiologically, and now emotionally independent from her family, and she can move on to the rest of her life.

The Tree of Heaven that grew in Francie's yard was an analogy for Francie's maturation; her worldly and self-awareness were able to grow and flourish despite her initial childish egocentrism and the stark poverty in which she lived. Almost anyone can at some point in life relate with the confusion and loneliness of growing up. Francie's journey from child to woman is not unique; every person in the world experiences similar feelings, and the explanation of these feelings can illuminate certain behaviors in the world of both children and adults alike.

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