CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Betty Smith is an American novelist and playwright who is well-known for her first novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* in the early 20th century. Smith has a writing style that enables the readers to understand her novels easily (Johnson) and her themes "mainly cover hope and poverty and track the lives of individual people struggling with both" ("A Tree Grows in Brooklyn Author") - themes that are so close and relevant to the daily life of her readers. These two significant characteristics of Smith eventually contribute to the popularity of her first novel. Smith is a successful writer in her generation and she has won several awards in literature, one of which is Avery Hopwood Award - an award from University of Michigan for creative work in writing - for her play *Jonica Starrs* in 1931 ("Betty Smith Biography"). Besides *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Smith wrote three other novels: *Tomorrow Will Be Better* (1947), *Maggie-Now* (1958), and *Joy in the Morning* (1963).

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Of her four novels, I am going to analyze her bestseller, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, which was first published in 1943. This book is an American novel about "the lives of ordinary working-class people that was written in a style that ordinary working-class people could understand" (Johnson). It is a semi-autobiographical novel and "one of the most cherished of American novels" (Cornfield). *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is successfully adapted into a film in 1945 and a Broadway Musical in 1951 ("A Tree Grows in Brooklyn Summary").

The novel itself is set in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 1912. It tells a story of an Irish American girl named Francie Nolan, who wants to get out of poverty and get a successful life in the future. In order to achieve her dream, Francie works hard by doing various jobs, from being a rag picker to becoming a reader in New York. At the end of the novel, it is described that Francie really manages to reach her dream as a successful person in spite of all the difficulties thrown her way. From the way Francie deals with her problem, it can be seen that the author wants to convey a certain important message to her readers. Therefore, it is felt best for me to choose theme as the literary element to be discussed in this thesis.

According to *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, theme is "the central idea and dominating idea in literary work . . . the message of moral implicit in any work of art" (Shaw 378). Theme can be drawn from various intrinsic elements in the novel. However, as the strength of the novel lies in its depiction of the main character, I choose to analyze the theme through portrayal of protagonist. Shaw states that portrayal "refers to the portrait (characterization) of individuals presented in literary selections" (295). The protagonist of the novel, Francie Nolan, does not change over time. Therefore, she is a static character, a character

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who "does not undergo important change in the course of the story, remaining essentially the same at the end as he or she was at the beginning" (Baker).

I am going to analyze the theme using formalism, which can be defined as "a style of inquiry that focuses on features of the literary text itself" ("Formalism"). As all the information that is needed to analyze the theme already exists in the novel, it is felt best for me to use this approach.

Statement of the Problem

The problems I would like to discuss in this thesis are:

1. What is the theme of the novel?

2. How does the portrayal of the protagonist help in revealing the theme?

Purpose of the Study

Based on the problems above, the purposes of the study are:

1. To show the theme of the novel.

2. To show how the portrayal of the protagonist helps in revealing the theme.

Method of Research

In my analysis, I use the library research. I read Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* as the primary text. Then, I gather and read some information that is taken from the Internet in order to support my research. Finally, I analyze the theme through the portrayal of the protagonist in the novel and draw some conclusions from my analysis.

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Organization of the Thesis

       The thesis consists of three chapters, preceded by the Table of Contents and the Abstract. Chapter One is the Introduction, which consists of the Background of the Study, the Statement of the Problem, the Purpose of the Study, the Method of Research, and the Organization of the Thesis. Chapter Two is the discussion on theme through the portrayal of the protagonist in Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.* The last chapter, Chapter Three, is the Conclusion. The thesis ends with the Bibliography and the Appendices, which consist of the synopsis of the novel and the biography of the author.