

# Historicity in a tree grows in brooklyn



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In the novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Betty Smith sets the scene historically for what is to unfold through place, time references, events, and people. The book covers the time period 1912 – 1919, seven crucial years which completes the bridge or development from pre-teen to adulthood. History is linear; hence chronological. However, in this novel, Betty Smith starts in the middle retraces her steps to the beginning when Frances Nolan's parents meet around 1900, and then proceeds from there until the end. History is not only factually based; it is an individual experience. Smith gives us history in the point of view of the protagonist, Frances Nolan who grows from a girl to a woman, living bitter and sweet experiences in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York. Smith employs politics, entertainment, places, inventions, and businesses to establish location in a historical context, in specific Williamsburg is the prime location from which the story issues; therefore, the central plot is based in this area in a crucial interval of history in the early 1900's where America undergoes rapid changes.

The climactic historical event in the entire novel is World War I (1914-1919) where presidents, politics, and war policies prevail. During WWI, Smith makes some poignant allusions through the characters to give a sense of what was unfolding and how the American public felt in time of war.

President Woodrow Wilson is a political figure in this novel. He steers America through the tumultuous years of WWI. He tries to negotiate peace among warring countries; however, he is inevitably drawn into the conflict and on April 06, 1917, declares war (Howard 102). Elected twice, first on 1912 and again in 1916, the characters echo Wilson's voice as they converse about political events and their hopes that America will be kept out of the

war (Smith 312). Wilson even has a street in New York in homage to his name with America embattled in war against the Germans. One witnesses the general anti-German sentiments in America when the street name was changed from Hamburg Avenue to Wilson Avenue (Smith 444). Two name changes in the novel reflects America's inimical relationship with Germany and is a vegetable name swap and a German descendant's decision to change his name. Sauerkraut's modification to the Liberty Cabbage americanizes the vegetable and eliminates the former German name that it carried before. An individual stands before a judge of German heritage as well and affirms his decision to change his name officially from Schultz to Scott – a more American name (Smith 347). Scott makes this decision during WWI.

Politics continue to be burning issue in the lives of New York's residents during wartime and positions time in a definite framework. Patrick McCarren, a prominent Democratic New York politician, stimulated and urged the building of Williamsburg Bridge, historic because until 1924, it was the longest suspension bridge in the world. Patrick McCarren (1847-1909) who has left to his legacy a park titled McCarren Park. It was named in his honor in 1909 when he died and in 1910, the New York Board of Alderman, renovated and updated the park (McCarren Park). The park is a place where the children develop and spend many fun times during their childhood and teen years. Neeley picks flowers for his girlfriend in the park where tulips and willows grow.

The entertainment industry is another time signifier which points an accurate finger to time development and history. Frances Nolan mentions her

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predilection for a theater show, *War Brides*, released in 1915, starring (Alla Nazimova) (Smith 409). Alla Nazimova was renowned for her role in the theatrical play on Broadway. This play was an American favorite and marked the springboard to her career. Ironically, this actress' last name is a bold allusion to Nazi Germany against whom the Americans will be fighting in WWII. The term war bride is a term applied to married women who choose to marry soldier especially during WWI and WWII so the historical context, the play on Broadway, and the political life all harmonize. The mention of the entertainment industry on Broadway also helps put a finger on time's location in the novel and in history as well. Frances recalls a moment when she visited a vaudeville house to see the French actress, Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) who had an amputated leg, was over 70, and yet continued acting and touring throughout America (Smith 409).

This information is more than sufficient to give the reason a historic notion of time. Sarah Bernhardt had a series of falls during rehearsals and plays which affected her leg and which over time developed gangrene. By 1915 when Bernhardt was 71, she had to undergo an amputation procedure on her right leg (Arthur 151). Consequently, she was confined to the wheelchair for the rest of her life. She bravely makes an American tour and plays in New York theaters in 1917 (Arthur 154). Frances also mentions seeing "Galsworthy's *Justice in Broadway* by Barrymore" (Smith 409). John Galsworthy (1867-1933) produced a play called *Justice* and the biography of John Barrymore (1882-1942) reports that he moved to New York in January 1917 to play in Galsworthy's plays (Morrison 55). Charlie Chaplin is another actor whose silent movie films generated much publicity especially in 1914 in New York

with his plays in the years leading up to the WWI (Smith 409). Charles “Charlie” Chaplin was a British actor who produced many plays and travelled to America starting from 1910 (Chaplin 125). Chaplin was renowned for his slapstick humor and mime therefore it is not surprising that the Nolans are fans of his as well.

Technological advancement awes Frances Nolan and other characters in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. From the beginning of the 20th century, inventions were released and commercialized. This time marks America’s Post Modernist period where the industrial era meets the technology. Humanity’s scientific progress marches in tandem with Frances’ growth and maturity. As a bildungsroman novel, the story line highlights a character’s coming of age, extending from childhood to adulthood. America experiences the leaps and bounds in technology and the characters’ lives are touched by these. Frances Nolan comments on the inventions in her day such as airplanes, electricity, radio, the Williamsburg Bridge, the Greenpoint Hospital, and automobiles. Airplane was first coined in 1908 and air travel’s commercialization began in 1919. An understatement on the airplane’s discovery and rise is, “ Airplanes, just a crazy fad, won’t last long” (Smith 347). Frances also mentions that gaslights are being phased out in favor of electricity. Even the tenants on Frances’ block are adapting to the electrifying improvements when landlords install electricity wire, a novelty for those living in the early 1900’s (Smith 399). Greenpoint Hospital opened to the public on October 1915 (New York State). The novel takes note of Greenpoint Hospital where Johnny Nolan dies, December 25, 1915 and where Katie bears her third child, Annie Laurie, born on May 28, 1916. The

Williamsburg Bridge was under construction from 1896 and was completed in 1903 (New York Architecture). In this novel, the bridge is a central metaphor symbolizing the point of transition from one point to another. One observes the Williamsburg Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the chronological bridge. Frances has to commute via all three bridges in her life as she grows and moves from one point to the next (Smith 53).

An exciting event for Brooklyn citizens is the procession in praise of Dr. Frederick Cook's being the first man to reach the North Pole and to live to tell about it. Smith records the erupting cheers from the children and many other proud Americans shouting, " Hurray for Dr. Cook! Hurray for Brooklyn!" (Smith 194). Dr. Cook is a native Brooklyn-born American, as such, after his triumphant return from the North Pole on April 21, 1908. New York held a warm welcome-back parade for Dr. Cook involving a motorcade with flowers, banners, and medals. This high rejoicing took place on September 22, 1909 (Cook 17).

The magical invention of the radio fascinated many Americans as it is described as " wireless, (the) greatest thing ever invented, words come through the air" (Smith 347). Radio was first called wireless telegraphy where information was transmitted via the American Radio and Research Company, broadcasting programs throughout the US since 1916. Another wireless system that was born during this technological explosion was the telephone also called wireless. By 1915, Bell ran his first telephone lines throughout the United States (Telephone History 1901-1940). Smith also refers to the growing prevalence of cars in America in the early 1900's. Carmakers from Detroit export to New York such that common laborers can

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now own automobiles, the author prophetically observes that soon horses drawn carriages and horses as a means of transport would be a thing of the past (Smith 347).

In another reference, the Castle Braid Company is a textile and hair factory where Katie Nolan and Hildy O'Dair work and eventually meet Johnny Nolan. The Castle Braid Company was a successful company in the 1800s to the early 1900's until 1905 when the company became insolvent and filed for bankruptcy (White 437, 438). Castle Braid was a German-based company located on 552 Broadway, New York. This factory's reference confirms historical truth since when the omniscient author revisits the 1900s when Johnny and Katie meet and fall in love and the factory is successful and in full operation (Smith 59).

Through her use of actual historical detail, Smith increases credibility of the novel by interspersing historical references to important events, places, and people who help shape American History. Technology, politics, personalities, and infrastructure all help forge deeply historical connections which authenticate the drama and moves forward the plot. Against a well-defined historical backdrop, the characters in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* grow, live, and learn.

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