

THE MOTIFS OF CHILDHOOD AND FRIENDSHIP IN THE NOVEL *SWING TIME* BY Z. SMITH

Abstract

In the novel *Swing Time* by Z. Smith, the motifs of childhood and friendship are considered as the basis for the formation of character and the acquisition of life experience of a person.

The aim of this article is to analyze the motifs of childhood and friendship as key factors in personality formation, as well as to examine the development of the protagonists' characters in the novel *Swing Time* from an individual authorial perspective.

The **relevance** of this study lies in examining Z. Smith's novel *Swing Time* as a model for understanding the specific psychological characteristics of mixed-race children and the literary features that define the author's worldview.

The study employs a comprehensive research **methodology** which combines the comparative-historical method, holistic analysis and elements of hermeneutics.

The **objective** of this study is to examine the role of childhood in the journey from innocence to experience, which enables the narrator and her friend to make their own choices regarding their outlook on life.

Results. It is shown that girls' friendship begins with shared interests, rivalry and comparison, and develops predominantly in a spiral pattern: in childhood, they interact intensively, meet every day and play together; then they attend the same school; later, there are lulls in the friendship, they meet

less often, but eventually a new rapprochement takes place. When Tracy and the narrator grow closer again, their relationship becomes more complicated, as the girls grow up and their views, values and experiences change. It turns out that the narrator remains the more loyal friend, genuinely admiring Tracy's talent, even as she constantly compares her own achievements with Tracy's. Reflections on childhood and friendship help the protagonist come to terms with adult life and take a bold step – exposing the pop star's illegal adoption. As they grow up, Tracy becomes a dancer and the narrator becomes the pop star's right-hand woman. Z. Smith skillfully conveys the complexities of friendship and shows how the characters change over time: Tracy gives up dancing for the sake of her children, whilst the protagonist gives up her job for the sake of the truth.

Conclusions. Friendship remains the most enduring aspect of the narrator's and her friend's lives. This interpretation offers a fresh perspective on Smith's work, highlighting how childhood, personal growth and the dynamics of friendship shape identity and life choices.

Keywords: *motif, childhood, friendship, image, personality formation, mixed race, life path.*

Н. Бондар. МОТИВИ ДИТИНСТВА ТА ДРУЖБИ У РОМАНІ З. СМІТ «ЧАС СВІНГУ»

Анотація

У романі З. Сміт «Час свінгу» розглядаються мотиви дитинства та дружби як основа формування характеру та набуття життєвого досвіду людини.

Мета статті полягає в аналізі мотивів дитинства як способу формування особистості та виявленні розвитку

характерів головних героїв роману в індивідуальній авторській інтерпретації.

Актуальність дослідження полягає у вивченні роману З. Сміт «Час свінгу» як моделі розуміння специфіки психології дитини змішаної раси та художні особливості, що вирізняють світогляд автора.

У роботі використано комплексну дослідницьку **методологію**, яка поєднує порівняльно-історичний метод, цілісний аналіз та елементи герменевтики.

Завданням дослідження є вивчення ролі дитинства у проходженні шляху від невинності до досвіду, що дає змогу оповідачці з її подругою зробити власний вибір життєвої позиції.

Результати. Показано, що дружба дівчаток починається зі спільних інтересів, суперництва та порівняння, а розвивається переважно по спіралі: у дитинстві вони інтенсивно спілкуються, зустрічаються щодня, грають разом; потім відвідують одну школу; згодом у дружбі з'являються паузи, вони зустрічаються рідше, але пізніше відбувається нове зближення. Коли Трейсі та оповідачка знову зближуються, їхні стосунки ускладнюються, адже дівчатка дорослішають, змінюються їхні погляди, цінності та досвід. Доведено, що оповідачка залишається більш відданою подругою, щиро захоплюючись талантом Трейсі, навіть коли вона постійно порівнює власні досягнення зі своїми. Роздуми про дитинство та дружбу допомагають головній героїні усвідомити доросле життя та здійснити сміливий вчинок – оприлюднити незаконне удочеріння поп-зіркою. На шляху до дорослішання Трейсі стає танцівницею, а оповідачка – правою рукою поп-зірки. З. Сміт майстерно передає складнощі дружби та показує, як з часом змінюються

героїні: Трейсі залишає танці заради дітей, а головна героїня постувається роботою заради правди.

Висновки. Найбільш непорушним у житті оповідачки і її подруги залишається дружба. Ця інтерпретація пропонує свіжий погляд на творчість Сміт, підкреслюючи, як дитинство, особистісний ріст та динаміка дружби формують ідентичність та життєвий вибір.

Ключові слова: *мотив, дитинство, дружба, образ, формування особистості, змішана раса, життєвий шлях.*

Introduction

Statement of the problem. Zadie Smith is an English writer, the author of six novels, essays, and short stories. She has won numerous literary awards, including the Whitbread Prize, the James Tait Black Prize, the Guardian First Book Award, the Orange Prize, the Bodley Medal, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Ukrainian literary scholars have examined her work, particularly the novels *White Teeth* (Ishchenko and Malashko, 2023) and *About Beauty* (Kalynych and Sazhyna, 2023). Vogue UA Culture Editor Dariia Slobodianyuk reviewed the novel *Swing Time* briefly (Slobodianyuk, 2019).

Despite the fact that some critics found Zadie Smith's fifth novel much weaker than her previous novels, *Swing Time* has not gone unnoticed by literary scholars abroad (Albert, 2024; Arslanova, 2019; Bakopoulos, 2016; Bass, 2016; Blanchard, 2016; Boyne, 2016; Brice, 2023; Cody-Rice, 2016; Dubois, 2017; Gordon, 2016; Gore, 2016; Heidelberger, 2017; Jilani, 2016; Kiderlin, 2020; Masad, 2016; Miller, 2016; Philo, 2016; Scafe, 2019; Selasi, 2016; Slobodianyuk, 2019; Stedman, 2017).

In her work, A. Arslanova examines the construction of immigrant identity in Zadie Smith's novels *White Teeth* and *Swing Time* (Arslanova, 2019). Noémi Albert, in his article "It's

a Shadow Life”: Zadie Smith’s *Swing Time*”, explores how the novel rethinks the binary opposition of visibility and invisibility and “current social phenomena, such as race in a global world, (post-) diaspora, minorities, class hierarchy, political agency, mobility, and identity” (Albert, 2024). Scafe explores Smith’s “interconnected spaces and the characters’ uneasy and shifting identities” as “representative of post-diasporic communities and subjectivities” (Scafe, 2019). However, despite the fact that a fairly wide range of researchers have turned to Z. Smith’s novel *Swing Time*, the motifs of childhood and friendship in it have not previously been studied.

The *relevance* of this study lies in examining Z. Smith’s novel *Swing Time* as a model for understanding the specific psychological characteristics of mixed-race children and the literary features that define the author’s worldview.

The *aim* of this article is to analyze the motifs of childhood and friendship as key factors in personality formation, as well as to examine the development of the protagonists’ characters in the novel *Swing Time* from an individual authorial perspective. This research object has been chosen because it allows for a deeper understanding of the psychological specifics of a mixed-race child and highlights the artistic features that reflect the author’s distinctive worldview.

The *objective* of this study is to examine the role of childhood in the journey from innocence to experience, which enables the narrator and her friend to make their own choices regarding their outlook on life.

Methodology and Methods

The comprehensive research methodology has been used in the work: the synthesis of the comparative historical method, holistic analysis, and some elements of mythopoetic and

hermeneutic methods. Poststructuralist approaches are taken into account, as well as the “close reading” technique.

Results and Discussions

In Z. Smith’s novel, *Swing Time*, the protagonist tells us about her childhood, friendship, adolescence, and her life up to the moment she begins her narrative. The novel explores many themes, including growing up in a mixed family, female friendship, race, and art, among others. The novel’s composition is organized by the protagonist’s memories and reflections, so that the poetic space loses its coherence, taking on the form of a collage and seeming to reflect the broken patterns of swing music. The novel consists of a prologue, seven parts, each containing a different number of chapters, and an epilogue. In the review of the book, L. Brice notes that she enjoyed the “time-jumping” and believes that Smith “was pretty masterful in how she hopped around multiple periods of the narrator’s life and made them blend together and ultimately combine in a satisfying way” (Brice, 2023). Characterizing the plot of the novel, I. Masad also notes: “The plot threads its way through time, staying true to its title and swinging back and forth like a clock that hasn’t been wound, the pendulum’s distance between the narrator’s present and her past getting closer and closer until finally, at the end, the clock stops, the past has caught up, the present is all that remains” (Masad, 2016). In the novel, different time layers coexist, and the present and the past of the narrator and her friend, Tracy, are closely intertwined.

The main character has no name, and many critics have drawn attention to this fact, for example, N. Albert believes that “her namelessness gives her both universality and invisibility” (Albert, 2024), and A. Arslanova suggests that she is unnamed because she is involved in a scandal with a pop star (Arslanova, 2019). E. Cody-Rice expresses her opinion on this matter as

follows: “It takes a while to notice that the protagonist, the intellectual, does not have a name. This is intentional, says Ms. Smith. we don’t call ourselves by name and this story is told in the first person” (Cody-Rice, 2016). L. Brice expresses his thoughts uncertainly: “I’m not entirely sure what to make of Smith’s choice not to give her a name other than it showing something about her truly just being a background player to Tracey, at least in her youth” (Brice, 2016). Thus, the protagonist does not give her name, and no one addresses her by name in the novel either, and it seems more logical to connect this fact with the recent scandal with the pop star, since she begins her story from this time.

In the first part, entitled *Early Days*, the reader is introduced to the protagonist’s childhood and that of her best friend. It is during this period that the narrator and her friend has the way from innocence to experience, which allows them gradually to shape their own life position. The protagonist meets a girl named Tracey at Miss Isabel’s church dance class. From their first meeting, the narrator likes Tracey; throughout the narrative, she reflects on her, her fate, and the influence of this friendship on the formation of her own character. Among the other girls, they stand out for their similar brown skin tone, which becomes the starting point for their rapprochement: “Our shade of brown was exactly the same – as if one piece of tan material had been cut to make us both – and our freckles gathered in the same areas, we were of the same height” (Smith, 2016). They have one more detail in common in their appearance, as the narrator notes, a “ridiculous nose – it went straight up in the air like a little piglet” (Smith, 2016). However, this is where their similarities end. The main character admires her new acquaintance from the very beginning: “Tracey’s face was perky and round, she looked like a darker Shirley Temple”,

“She had spiral curls ... with satin yellow bows” (Smith, 2016). Her words convey not only admiration but also a hidden envy; the comparison to a famous actress emphasizes the narrator’s desire for brightness that her mother’s strict upbringing deprived her of. The main character’s mother dresses her daughter strictly and condemns Tracey’s bright outfit: “to dress your daughter like a little whore” (Smith, 2016). The narrator comes to the conclusion that Tracey is “her own mother’s most striking accessory”, while she herself, with her inconspicuousness, only “signified admirable maternal restraint” (Smith, 2016). Thus, the reader is contrasted between two images: the bright Tracey and the more modest narrator, who seems to remain in the shadow of her friend.

Later, during dance classes, a kind of rivalry develops between the girls. Tracey turns out to be a talented dancer: her feet resemble “two hummingbirds in flight, curved in on themselves” (Smith, 2016). The narrator, suffering from flat feet, cannot fully master dance except tap, but surpasses her friend in singing. She notices the impression her voice makes on those around her when she stays after class to sing songs accompanied by piano. This contrast highlights the different modes of self-expression between the heroines: Tracey expresses herself through her body and movement, while the narrator expresses herself through her voice, which early on hints at the differences in their personalities and anticipates the later divergence of their paths in life.

Rivalry manifests itself in other aspects of their friendship as well: initially, the girls attend different schools and see each other only at dance classes. Despite their mothers’ disapproval, they gradually become closer. Living across the street from each other, the girls begin to visit frequently. Thus, a friendship is formed, based on common interests, rivalry, and

comparison. Each gains what she lacks: the storyteller gets the opportunity to play with toys she does not have, and Tracy gets her friend's attention and admiration for her ability to create stories instantly.

Their games and shared activities reflect the psychological depth of their friendship. Tracey's games often manifest through aggression and cruelty: she beats her doll for "pissing", puts it in a corner, or calls it a fool. The narrator wonders if there is a connection between play and reality, or if these are just soap opera replies. Perhaps Tracey's cruelty reflects her inner struggles, a sense of injustice, or the fear that her father is not living with her mother because of her. At the same time, both girls find joy and development: they enjoy watching Fred Astaire movies, mimicking dance moves, and learning dance steps. In this way, each girl gets the opportunity to utilize her strengths and compensate for the other's weaknesses, strengthening the complementary nature of their friendship. Ultimately, the protagonist and Tracey's friendship is formed through a combination of similarities and differences: similarities create a sense of intimacy, while differences foster rivalry and a stimulus for self-expression. Games, shared activities, and emotional support create a complex, multilayered bond that lays the foundation for future conflicts, differing life choices, and profound psychological development for the characters.

The two girls' brown skin tones are acquired differently: the narrator's father is white, while Tracey's mother is white. At first glance, the protagonist seems to have a happy life: she grows up in a two-parent family with loving parents. However, the narrator's mother clearly does not have enough time for her daughter. She studies sociology and politics, and the girl often feels as if her mother is avoiding the traditional role of

motherhood. Reflecting on her, the narrator notes: “I don’t mean that my mother didn’t love me but she was not a domestic person: her life was in her mind. The fundamental skill of all mothers – the management of time – was beyond her. She measured time in pages. Half an hour, to her, meant ten pages read, or fourteen, depending on the size of the type, and when you think of time in this way there isn’t time left for anything else, there’s no time to go to the park or get ice cream, no time to put a child to bed, no time to listen to the teary recounting of a nightmare.” (Smith, 2016). Only at the very beginning does the mother take her daughter to dance classes, but later the father takes on this responsibility. It is noteworthy that the narrator’s mother largely retains the archetypal role of mentor, while the father, caring and loving, gradually loses his mentoring role and becomes more of a keeper of the hearth: he cares for the family, preparing meals for them, while the mother is largely uninvolved in housework – “he was the chef in our home” (Smith, 2016). Thus, a peculiar redistribution of traditional parental roles occurs in the narrator’s family: the father assumes the responsibility of maintaining the home space, while the mother becomes her daughter’s primary intellectual and moral mentor. It is she who shapes the heroine’s understanding of personal freedom and the need to follow one’s own path, explaining why one should not play someone else’s game – otherwise “you’ll end up a shade of yourself” (Smith, 2016).

Tracey’s family situation is different. It turns out her father does not live with the family, but she tells everyone he dances in Michael Jackson’s band. She is extremely proud of her father and she is ready to defend him at any mention. Later, the narrator learns that Tracey’s father is actually in prison, but this does not stop her from openly admiring him. When he returns from prison, Tracey experiences genuine joy. Traditionally, the

father's figure is associated with themes of teaching, mentoring, and wisdom and occupies a prominent place in the mythopoetic locus of the home, where he largely provides stability and a sense of security for the future. However, in this case, the archetypal image of the wise father is somewhat distorted: he is absent from the family's life and unable to fulfill the mentoring function that influences the development of his daughter's personality and prepares her for life's challenges.

Tracey's mother loves her daughter and allows her complete freedom, buys her bright toys and hardly controls her behavior, while the main character lacks such independence: "What do we want from our mothers when we are children? Complete submission" (Smith, 2016). The narrator observes Tracey's outrageous behavior and dreams of such freedom: "I dreamed of freedom like hers" (Smith, 2016). They control her, ask her how things are at school. She cannot really tell them, because they have a new game on the school playground: "There is a mania in the playground for grabbing vaginas" (Smith, 2016). The narrator admits that at that stage she considered her parents more innocent than she was: "I thought of them at this point as two children, more innocent than me, whom it was my responsibility to protect from the kind of uncomfortable facts that they would either over-think (my mother) or over-feel (my father)" (Smith, 2016). In school games, Tracy excels, while her friend tries to keep up, even though she herself finds them repulsive. Thus Z. Smith reexamines the traditional model of childhood innocence: children are no longer as pure and defenseless as commonly believed, and their behavior reflects a complex interplay of freedom, control, and an early understanding of social roles.

Since childhood, Tracey has devoted herself entirely to dancing, aiming to succeed in this field. While her mother values

only Miss Isabel's praise, the narrator's mother values academic success. Tracey does not interest lessons, skips school, actively rebels, and defends her principles. In the protagonist's class, she immediately stands out, demonstrating that she only associates with "her peers" and she is unafraid to challenge the rules. At a classmate's party, she draws attention to herself and her abilities, demonstrating that she and the narrator are no worse than the white children: "how to steal pick-and-mix without paying for it" (Smith, 2016). The protagonist attracts this boldness and unbridled nature, which contrasts with her own timidity and prudence. Her interactions with Tracey give the narrator the opportunity to develop courage and confidence, demonstrating how friendship can foster personal growth through competition and a friend's example.

The girls have different tastes in music: Tracey loves pop music, so her entire room is covered with photographs of Michael and Janet Jackson, Prince, Madonna, James Brown. The narrator, on the contrary, likes old songs and dancers of the seventies; she goes to the library and chooses "old seventies biographies of the great MGM and RKO idols", she tears out the portraits and wallpapers them in her room. The protagonist's refusal to conform to her friend's tastes can be seen as an important step toward developing her own identity. She is no longer just Tracey's shadow – she has her own opinions, preferences, and inner world, reflecting her gradual maturation and independent personal development.

Unfortunately for the narrator, her friendship with Tracey proves unstable. The first chill occurs when Tracey's father is sent to prison. At first, the protagonist is upset, but after her friend's return, their relationship is restored. During their periods of separation, the narrator reads and reflects extensively, developing her own character, tastes, and beginning the process

of self-identification. From the film about Astaire, she concludes that to achieve goals in life, one must “treat oneself as a kind of stranger, to remain unattached and unprejudiced in your own case” (Smith, 2016). Later, when she works for pop star Aimee, her advice will take on practical significance: “In this life ... you’ve got to know what you want. You have to visualize it, and then you have to pull it down” (Smith, 2016). However, the narrator is not yet ready to fully emerge from the shadow of Tracy and other people, which emphasizes her gradual maturation and search for her own independent position.

After watching the film *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, the main character rushes to share her impressions with her friend, as the dancer in the film resembles Tracey, and this could help her prepare for her audition for a stage school. However, Tracey does not answer her calls and again distances herself, neither coming nor coming out to meet her. The main character is not ready to let go of the friendship yet: she needs someone close to her, someone with whom she can exchange opinions and share little secrets. She does “many attempts to ambush her” (Smith, 2016), spies on her at rehearsals, but Tracy just waves at her. The narrator again blames herself, believing that the reason is in her body and clumsiness: “I was still a lanky, flat-chested child, lurking in the doorway, while Tracey, dancing in the light, was already a little woman?” (Smith, 2016). The comparison with Tracey highlights the differences in their physical and emotional development. Finally, Tracey makes a concession and meets with her friend to discuss a clip from the film. This becomes the cause for subsequent phone calls: to the narrator’s delight, Tracy always answers, even when her mother picks up. Their shared interest in the dancer from the film renews their friendship, demonstrating that despite disagreements and periods of

distance, emotional connection and mutual passion remain the foundation of their relationship.

During this time, the protagonist's parents separate, which comes as a real shock to her. The girl does not even want to share this news with Tracey, considering the topic too personal. Her parents are no longer the most important people in her life, and now her friend's opinion is the most important. However, Tracey does not express her thoughts during this period, which leaves the narrator feeling resentful. She is left almost alone, with no one to share her thoughts and experiences with: her mother is absorbed in her political ideas, and it is impossible to freely discuss worrying issues with her father. All of the protagonist's mental monologues are aimed at understanding her own identity and cultural belonging, but she has yet to take active steps to change her life. This period of loneliness and reflection highlights her gradual internal maturation and search for an independent position, forming the basis for future self-determination.

Unlike Tracey, the protagonist is insecure, timid, and calm, but a turbulent soul rages within her: in her inner monologues, she argues with her mother and rebels against her wishes. Teachers praise the narrator and advise her to try to pass the entrance exams to independent schools. Her mother is delighted, seeing this as an opportunity she never had, and wants her daughter to succeed. However, for the first time in her life, the protagonist reveals a hidden rebelliousness: she refuses to fulfill her mother's hopes, "a great, sullen fury came over me, I didn't feel like traveling on their train, wrote a few words here and there, ignored the pages of maths and science, flagrantly failed" (Smith, 2016). Although she does not know yet what she wants and does not have a clear plan for the future, Tracey's influence gradually forms stubbornness and strength of

character in her, stimulating her personal development and improvement.

While the protagonist and Tracey go to the same school and dance classes, they share common interests and their friendship remains strong. However, when they begin attending different schools – Tracey in dance school and the narrator in a new high school – the protagonist feels lonely: “a body without a distinct outline” (Smith, 2016). She has no friends at her new school and she is not accepted because of her “high color” (Smith, 2016). They tease her and take her money, but due to the girl’s lack of reaction, the aggressors quickly lose interest in her. School seems like a place of survival to her: “I had to survive each day until I was free again” (Smith, 2016).

Meanwhile, the narrator’s attention is focused on Tracey’s life. She enthusiastically talks about performing, for example, at a memorial service for Fred Astaire, dressed in “as Bojangles, in a white top hat and tails”, and loud applause. The narrator sees her friend’s life as bright and exciting, while she herself struggles only to survive. Over time, the friendship begins to fade. Tracy seems always surrounded by attention, brightly dressed, with some cute guy: “Electric, charismatic, outrageously sexual, filled with the summer’s energy at all times, even in freezing February” (Smith, 2016). Comparing her life to Tracey’s, the narrator gradually distances herself, avoiding encounters. Although her mother explains that Tracey has her own difficulties and troubles, envy prevents the heroine from seeing this: “her life was perfect as far as I was concerned, and this is one side-effect of envy, maybe, this failure of imagination. In my mind, her struggles were over. She was a dancer: she’d found her tribe” (Smith, 2016). Thus, envy and comparison with others affects friendship and the perception of one’s own life, leading to alienation and personal isolation.

At fourteen, the narrator tries to express herself by becoming a goth: “dusting my face ghost-white and painting my lips blood red, letting my hair half-dread and spraying some parts of it purple” (Smith, 2016). It is not true rebellion – she imitates others and enjoys her parents’ reactions, but soon realizes this lifestyle is not for her. A significant event occurs when Tracy, who was drugged and rescued by the narrator and her mother, accuses them of kidnapping her: “Tracey accused us both of kidnapping her, of trying to control her... we had even tried to steal her from her own mother, her own father!” (Smith, 2016). This incident helps the heroine understand her own boundaries and ways of self-expression, completely reject the gothic life and demonstrate emotional maturity, distinguishing personal development from blind imitation of others.

The narrator’s friendship with Tracey develops in a spiral: as children, they had intense interactions, meeting every day and playing together, then attending the same school, with gaps and then a renewed rapprochement. As they grow older, the relationship changes and becomes more complex. As an adult, the protagonist distances herself from her mother and lives with her father. She accidentally encounters an old friend, and under her critical gaze, she feels “like some old diary” (Smith, 2016). Tracey mocks her new glasses and worn-out shoes, boasts about her success and the fact that she does not have to take exams. The narrator feels envious: “Where I was in chains, she was free!” (Smith, 2016). Tracey tells her that her father is building a large house in Kingston and that she will soon move there, with New York City opening up new opportunities nearby. However, she soon learns this is untrue when she sees Tracey’s father with a pregnant woman. Despite this, Tracey continues to project success and independence, making communication between

them difficult and limiting their ability to discuss personal and troubling issues as they once did.

Another encounter with Tracey occurs when the protagonist goes with her father to see the university. The narrator again watches her friend with admiration: “Spotless white jeans and little high-heeled ankle boots and a black leather jacket cut close to her body and zipped up right to her chin: it looked like a kind of body armor” (Smith, 2016). However, she is no longer the same unbridled and cheerful girl. The main character notices Tracey approaching them “in a weirdly formal way”, with manners that belong “to a different girl altogether, from a different neighborhood, a different world” (Smith, 2016). Tracey begins listing the skills she learned in class, necessary for performing on the West End stage, in an effort to impress the narrator’s father. However, instead of showing respect, he laughs loudly, which offends Tracey and causes her resentment. She perceives herself as having ascended to a new level of social status and expects to be treated and respected accordingly. Thus, social status and ambition influence the dynamics of the friendship and the mutual perceptions of the characters, and also demonstrates that previous emotional connections become more complex and less natural with age.

Miss Isabel invites the main character and Tracey to work on a performance at the end of the summer. As the narrator notes “Miss Isabel’s vision of our friendship was stuck in time” (Smith, 2016). They agree, and of course, everyone at the performance looks at Tracey with admiration, not noticing her friend. The narrator, seeing the aged Mr. Booth at the piano, approaches him and begins singing about true friends. She still dreams of true friendship, fondly remembering their childhood. It seems Tracey is thinking about this too, and she turns to her and smiles tenderly: “I saw the seven-, eight-, nine- and ten-

year-old in her, the teenager, the little woman. All of these versions of Tracey were reaching across the years of the church hall to ask me a question: What are you going to do? To which we both already knew the answer. Nothing” (Smith, 2016). Thus, it can be said that, despite the nostalgia for childhood and the fleeting feeling of closeness, the heroines realize the impossibility of returning to their former friendship and prefer to leave everything unchanged.

Over time, the heroines’ relationship changes as they mature and gain new experiences. Their next meeting takes place in a pizzeria: Tracey, looking impeccable, announces a role she is playing in the West End. The narrator takes the news calmly, and Tracey offers her a job at the theater. Now the protagonist assists Tracey with rehearsals and performances, and their relationship becomes more trusting. Only she knows about her friend’s secret affair, and their friendship reaches a level of personal trust. She sincerely admires Tracey’s talent and rejoices at the troupe’s success, and she herself gets a job at the British version of YTV. Despite this, Tracey is not happy for her friend and, instead of offering support, sends her a shocking letter about what happened to the narrator’s father. The letter is burned, and it becomes clear that the friendship as it once was no longer exists – only memories and shared hardships remain. The friendship between the protagonist and Tracey has undergone significant changes: maturation, new values, and life experiences have made their relationship more complex and trusting, yet also fragile. Love and admiration for each other’s talents couldn’t fully overcome envy and personal boundaries, and despite shared memories, the former friendship ended.

Eight years later, the narrator sees Tracey at an operetta, which she attends with her friend, Kramer. The protagonist tells him that she has known the girl for a long time, but they have

not seen each other for eight years. He comments: “See, in guy world we’d call that an ‘ex-friend,’ or better still: ‘a stranger’” (Smith, 2016). Of course, the narrator can no longer call Tracey a friend, as she has no idea how or what she lives for. She reads her biography in a program and she is disappointed; she had imagined her life differently: it turns out Tracy did not finish her studies, her roles are small and insignificant, and she did not achieve what she aspired to as a child and teenager. After the operetta, the protagonist wants to meet Tracy, not even knowing what she will talk about. She is drawn to her, just as she was as a child. Suddenly, she sees her mother drive up in a car and notices two sleeping children in the backseat. And she loses the desire to talk to her friend. Thus, it confirms Kramer’s idea of “former friends”: despite memories and a sudden desire to get closer, the narrator realizes that the intimacy that could restore their friendship no longer exists between them.

The main character’s mother constantly reminds her of Tracey, calling her a friend: “It’s your friend – Tracey”, “No – your friend Tracey” (Smith, 2016). The narrator becomes irritated and demands that Tracey no longer be mentioned as her friend – there has been no friendship for a long time. It turns out Tracey has been bombarding her mother with letters: first they were with requests to find out why her son was kicked out, then with threats and accusations, revealing a hidden, perhaps childish, hatred for the narrator’s mother. To protect her ill mother, the heroine decides to meet with Tracey. Entering her house, she sees “an anxious, heavy-set, middle-aged woman in terrycloth pajama bottoms, house slippers and a black sweatshirt” (Smith, 2016). She is no longer a bright, talented girl, but a woman whose appearance betrays anxiety and fatigue. For the first time, the comparison favors the narrator, but internally she remains submissive – apologizing and acting

obsequious, as if the very atmosphere of the apartment casts her in a submissive role. Tracey declares that there can be no understanding between them, as the narrator now lives in a “different system”. Despite this, the narrator musters up courage, asserts her boundaries, and warns her former friend to leave her family alone, threatening to go to the police. Thus, maturation and life experience help the protagonist break free from subjugation, find inner strength, and set her own boundaries, even with the person who once dominated her life.

As an adult, the narrator often reminisces about her childhood and her confident friend, and these memories help her take a decisive step: revealing the illegal adoption of Amy, for whom she has long worked as an assistant. Finally, the protagonist takes the real step. Her mother is happy for her daughter, as she always knew she was timid and shy. The narrator confesses: “A truth was being revealed to me: that I had always tried to attach myself to the light of other people, that I had never had any light of my own. I experienced myself as a kind of shadow” (Smith, 2016), – now she wants to live her own life. Meanwhile, Tracey posts an old dance when they were children: “two brown girls dancing like adults – copying adult moves innocently, but skillfully, as brown girls often can” (Smith, 2016), as if reminding them who is the main one and giving the grounds for judgment. The narrator, hurt and disappointed, begins to write emails to Tracy, which she never even opens – and her friend’s power over her remains palpable. Nevertheless, she feels an inner obligation to Tracey: “I was her sister: I had a sacred duty toward her. Even if only she and I knew it and recognized it, it was still true” (Smith, 2016). The main character remains loyal to her friend, the only one who understands her talent, which Tracy was unable to fully express on stage. In the end, the narrator sees Tracy happy, twirling in a

dance with her children. As noted T. Selasi: “With shifting identities (brown, white; goth, ‘conscious’; ‘big woman’, fallen heroine), our narrator seeks above all a place where she belongs. That place is what a best friend, even an estranged one, can be, especially for a woman. Its comforts cannot be underestimated, not least in a life of great change” (Selasi, 2016). Indeed, Tracey’s power over her friend remains significant, and the narrator cannot completely abandon the friendship, hoping for a new round of their relationship.

Conclusions

The article analyzes the motifs of childhood and friendship as the way of personality formation, as well as identifies the character development of the protagonists in the novel *Swing Time* in the individual author’s interpretation. Childhood serves as the foundation for shaping character and acquiring life experience. It is during this period that the narrator and her friend progress from innocence to experience, which allows them to make their own personal choices and define their life paths. The protagonist learns to interact with her friend and others, developing her worldview. The reader encounters two girls: the bright Tracey, with her yellow ribbons and frilly pink skirt, and the narrator, who fades into the background in her plain clothing, standing almost in the shadow of her friend. Beyond the shared skin tone, they are very different: the narrator is quiet, timid, and insecure, while Tracey is bold, determined, and self-confident. As we know, in friendship, opposites often attract. Their friendship begins with shared interests, rivalry, and comparison, and develops in a spiral. In childhood, they interact intensely, meeting daily and playing together; then they attend the same school, but with pauses and growing distance, only to reunite later. However, as Tracey and the narrator reconnect, their relationship evolves and becomes more complex, reflecting

their growing maturity, shifting values, and life experience. Throughout, the narrator remains the more loyal friend, genuinely admiring Tracey's talent, even as she continually measures her own achievements against hers. Reflections on childhood and friendship help the narrator understand her adult life and take a courageous step – exposing the illegal adoption organized by a pop star. The girls' journeys toward adulthood are shown in their evolving roles: Tracey becomes a professional dancer, while the narrator becomes a pop star's assistant. Zadie Smith skillfully conveys the complexities of friendship and shows how the girls transform over time: Tracey eventually leaves dancing to raise her children, and the narrator sacrifices her work to pursue justice. The novel concludes with the narrator approaching her friend, hoping for a renewed chapter in their relationship. Thus, friendship remains the most enduring element in their lives. This interpretation offers a fresh perspective on Smith's work, highlighting how childhood, personal growth, and the dynamics of friendship shape identity and life choices.

Конфлікт інтересів. Авторка декларує, що не має конфлікту інтересів.

Політика використання III. Авторка декларує, що не використовувала III в процесі цього дослідження.

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Рукопис статті отримано 20 березня 2026 року.

Рукопис статті прорецензовано 11 березня 2026 року.

Рукопис затверджено до публікації 21 квітня 2026 року.

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