

Transcendental Reflections: Literary Preservation of Ethnobiological Heritage and Individualism in Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

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DOI: 10.63001/tbs.2025.v20.i03.pp425-428

KEYWORDS

Ethnobiology, Tradition,
Medicine, Individualism,
Transcendentalism, Literature
Received on:

04-06-2025

Accepted on:

02-07-2025

Published on:

12-08-2025

ABSTRACT

Literature is a medium of ideological and philosophical transmissions and rich repository of cultural and scientific knowledge. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith presents a blend of ideological and traditional medical practices representing both ethnobiological knowledge and experiential knowledge passed down through oral traditions and lived realities. This research aims to bridge literary theme with biological knowledge particularly the traditional and home-based remedies for minor health issues. The protagonist's and her family's adherence to these folk practices, despite societal skepticism, serves as a survival mechanism and as an assertion of individual agency, a quiet defiance of collectivist medical authority and a reinforcement of transcendentalist and individualist ideals. This approach proposes a diversified methodology that reconsiders canonical literature as a site for retrieving ethnobiological insight, reinforcing the value of lived science in fiction.

Literature serves as one of humanity's enduring vessels for the transmission of knowledge. The epic poems of antiquity, the ballads of medieval period, or the realist novels of the twentieth century, stories have always been more than entertainment. They carry the weight of philosophical perspectives, cultural traditions, practical know-how, and the lessons of lived experience. In some cases, literary works become unexpected collections of scientific and ethnographic data, repositories of knowledge about health, ecology, and survival strategies. In this tradition, Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* offers for a unique interdisciplinary study, sitting at the crossroads of literary analysis, ethnobiology, and the medical humanities.

The novel was set in the early twentieth century, revolves around the Nolan family, a working-class, first- and second-generation immigrants reflecting the hardships of poverty in Brooklyn. The novel preserves a repertoire of traditional home remedies, each one drawn from a body of folk medical practice sustained through oral tradition with its well-known themes of education, resilience, and the immigrant experience. These details are not just background color; they represent an *ethnobiological heritage* passed down through generations. The garlic necklace to ward off mumps, kerosene for lice, mustard plasters for chest congestion, these are more than quaint superstitions or old wives' tales. They are survival strategies, deeply rooted in cultural identity,

positioned in a historical moment when institutional medical care was expensive, distant, or distrusted.

The Nolans' commitment to these remedies, even against the skepticism of neighbors or the ridicule of peers, reflects more than stubborn habit. It is a conscious act of autonomy, a quiet refusal to surrender entirely to the authority of modern medical institutions. In this way, Smith's work seems loaded with the ideals of American Transcendentalism, a movement that itself grew out of the broader Romantic tradition in the nineteenth century. Transcendentalism did not emerge in isolation. It was shaped by the Romantic Movement, which had already spread through America, Britain, and Europe by the early 1800s. Romanticism, with its celebration of nature, the individual spirit, and the intuitive over the purely rational, created stage for the transcendentalist ethos. Figures like James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman each absorbed and reinterpreted Romantic ideals, presenting in novels, poems, and essays across a variety of genres. Not all were self-identified Transcendentalists, they shared with Emerson, Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller a deep resistance to conformity and a belief in the sovereignty of the individual mind.

Truth was not simply handed down by institutions, be they churches, governments, or academies, but discovered in direct, unmediated contact with the natural and spiritual world for

transcendentalists. Emerson's famous call in *Nature* urged Americans to enjoy a direct relation to the universe than through second-hand traditions. This emphasis on self-reliance extended beyond philosophy into everyday life, including how one approached health, healing, and the body's relationship with nature. In *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, the Nolan family's folk remedies read as small but significant enactments of this philosophy. Katie Nolan's decision to treat her children's ailments with the home-made tools and knowledge is not born of ignorance but of trust in a tradition that had proved itself effective over generations. Garlic (*Allium sativum*), for example, has documented antimicrobial properties (Etkin, 2006). Mustard plasters, though uncomfortable, stimulate circulation and relieve chest congestion. Even kerosene, dangerous by modern standards, was once a widely used lice treatment in communities with few alternatives.

Smith's descriptions are precise, almost clinical, but never away from emotional resonance. Francie's garlic necklace, worn to school despite the pungent odor and subsequent social isolation, becomes both a literal and symbolic shield, protecting her body from disease and her identity. The scene in which "there was always a cleared space around her" (Smith, p. 158) captures both the detachment of poverty and the resilience of one who refuses to disown inherited wisdom for the sake of social acceptance. In medical anthropology, such resistance aligns with broader patterns observed in immigrant communities, where traditional practices bridge the gap between old world heritage and new world realities (Sobo, 2015). Here, home remedies are not just medical interventions but cultural markers, showing values of thrift, ingenuity, and independence.

Ethnographic fieldwork and oral history are the usual methods for recording traditional medical practices. Literature offers a complementary, and overlooked archive. Fiction incorporates this knowledge within lived narratives, preserving not only the what of the remedy but the why, its social meaning, emotional weight, and role in shaping identity. Scholars in ethnobiology have begun to acknowledge fictional texts, especially those grounded in realist detail, can supplement formal scientific records (Albuquerque et al., 2021). In *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, these remedies appear not as anthropological set pieces but as integral parts of the characters' lives. They are woven into the rhythm of daily existence, into moments of crisis and care. This incorporation is precisely what gives them ethnobiological value: they are shown in context, in use, sustained by belief and experience. The novel's conflict between folk medicine and institutional medicine registers a larger philosophical struggle between individual autonomy and collectivist authority. On one side lies the structured, standardized approach of modern biomedicine, powerful, evidence-based, but impersonal. On the other lies the flexible, experiential, and community-rooted approach of traditional healing.

Smith holds the co-existence of both systems. Institutional medicine offers the promise of universal standards and predictable outcomes but demands conformity and the surrender of local variation. Folk medicine preserves individuality and cultural heritage but lack the rigor of its institutional component. In the Nolan household, this tension is not resolved but lived through, negotiated day by day about when to trust the doctor and when to trust tradition. From a transcendentalist viewpoint, this negotiation itself becomes a moral act. Emerson and Thoreau argued for the primacy of personal judgment, even against prevailing authority, when that judgment was rooted in lived experience and moral conviction. The Nolans' persistence in using their remedies demonstrates these aspects.

The intellectual project of the Transcendentalists was never limited to abstract musings about the soul or vague celebrations of nature. It was a call to moral independence, to resist passively inheriting the conclusions of previous generations, no matter how venerable they seemed. In *Nature*, Emerson argued that too many of his contemporaries saw God and nature through the eyes of others, from second-hand revelations rather than cultivating an original relation to the universe. That phrase, original relation, is crucial. It stresses that truth, spiritual, moral, or practical, must be personally experienced and tested.

This tenacity on direct engagement extended naturally into social and political concerns. Transcendentalists were straightforward reformers, especially on the issue of slavery. Emerson, Thoreau, and their circle believed that slavery was not just a political stance but a moral indignation, a violation of the individual's divine right to self-determination. William Ellery Channing, a Unitarian minister who inspired much of their thought, framed abolition as an act of universal moral responsibility: "To embody and express this great truth is in every man's power; and thus every man can do something to break the chain of the slave." The abolitionist struggle might seem far removed from the domestic scenes of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, the moral logic is parallel. Transcendentalists defended the right of the enslaved to choose their own life's course, the Nolans' folk medical practices defend the right of individuals to choose their own modes of healing, even when those choices arise from official doctrine. The stakes may differ in scale, but the principle, self-reliance against authority, remains constant.

The Romantic sensibility that fed into Transcendentalism was not confined to essays and political speeches; it shaped the era's entire literary landscape. Romanticism prized emotion, intuition, and the beauty of nature as essential replacements to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the mechanization of the Industrial Revolution. This aspect valued the idiosyncratic over the standardized, the handcrafted over the mass-produced, the lived moment over the abstract system. Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller, this meant elevating the inner voice above the dictates of custom or law. Novelists like Hawthorne and Melville, it meant probing the moral and psychological complexities of individuals who resisted societal norms. Whitman, it meant celebrating the vast, democratic chorus of voices that made up America. Across genres, the Romantic influence legitimized the idea that personal experience could stand as a form of truth in itself. When we see Katie Nolan choosing garlic and mustard plasters over store-bought pharmaceuticals, we are not simply witnessing thrift; we are seeing a romantic gesture, a prioritizing of lived tradition over impersonal industry. In the fabric of Smith's novel, this gesture is not sentimental nostalgia but a pragmatic assertion of agency in a world that stripped working-class immigrants of control over their own circumstances. Full appreciation for the ethnobiological dimension of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, it is worth pausing to consider the nature of ethnobiology itself. Ethnobiology has its deep historical roots, but only emerged as a named discipline a little over a century ago. Its scope is broad: it examines the ways human cultures perceive, classify, and interact with the biological world, plants, animals, ecosystems, and the medicinal knowledge embedded in those relationships.

The field is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing on anthropology, botany, zoology, pharmacology, and even the humanities. This hybrid nature gives ethnobiology great flexibility, but it has also made it difficult to establish unified theoretical frameworks. Much of its literature remains descriptive, cataloging species names and uses without fully integrating the cultural, symbolic, and ecological dimensions into a cohesive whole. Ethnobiology's development has been geographically scattered, shaped by local traditions, academic institutions, and even non-academic community research. In many universities, ethnobiology is still within either anthropology or biology departments, which can limit the truly transdisciplinary work the field requires. Funding follows these same disciplinary lines, reinforcing the separation between natural and social sciences. Ethnobiology's real power lies in bridging precisely this divide, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, blending material and symbolic perspectives, and drawing equally on emic (insider) and etic (outsider) viewpoints. This is where literature becomes an unexpected but valuable partner to ethnobiology.

A realist novel like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* does what a lab notebook or species catalog cannot: it embeds remedies within the messiness of daily life, showing how they function not just as treatments but as acts of care, identity, and resistance. Such fictional accounts preserve both the practical details, the plants used, the methods of preparation, and the cultural logics that sustain them. When Francie wears garlic to school, the scene transmits ethnobiological data (garlic as a protective agent) but also reveals social dynamics: the way a community sanctions or

isolates nonconformity, the persistence of tradition in the face of ridicule, the quiet moral calculations made by individuals balancing health, reputation, and belonging. This is why literature can serve as an ethnobiological archive even without conscious intent. It records not only the remedies themselves but the worlds in which they make sense. Ethnobiologists, such narratives are invaluable, especially when written records from the same period might neglect the voices and practices of marginalized communities.

Ethnobiology's triple roots in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities recall the Renaissance ideal, when knowledge was less rigidly compartmentalized. In that earlier intellectual climate, a physician might also be a botanist, poet, and philosopher, moving fluidly between disciplines in pursuit of a more holistic understanding of life. In our own time, such cross-pollination is harder to achieve, yet the ethnobiological study of literature offers one avenue back toward it. In *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, healing knowledge sits precisely at this interface. It is grounded in the natural properties of plants and other substances (the natural sciences), embedded in family and neighborhood traditions (the social sciences), and given narrative form through Smith's art (the humanities). To study the novel ethnobiologically is therefore to honor its full complexity, rather than stripping out one dimension in favor of another. Of course, integrating disciplines is not without its difficulties. Methods from biology and anthropology operate on different assumptions about what constitutes valid evidence. A botanist might demand laboratory verification of a plant's efficacy; an anthropologist might prioritize the cultural meaning of its use, regardless of biochemical proof. In literary ethnobiology, these tensions can be even sharper: how do we treat a fictionalized account as a source of knowledge without conflating it with empirical observation?

The challenges are what make the approach valuable. Acknowledging the interpretive leaps and limitations involved, researchers can more fully explore the *how* and *why* behind healing traditions, not just the *what*. In doing so, they recover a more human-scale understanding of medicine, one that accommodates reason and intuition, evidence and belief, individuality and community. The ethnobiological lens reveals that the remedies in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* are not incidental background details; they operate as cultural anchors that tether the Nolan family to a shared past. Katie Nolan's use of home-based treatments, mustard plasters, onion poultices, vinegar rubs, is part of an inherited repertoire of knowledge that reaches back through generations, across oceans, and into the Old-World traditions of immigrant ancestors. These are not merely economical substitutes for modern medicine; they are enactments of cultural continuity.

Such practices also preserve a sense of agency. In a working-class neighborhood where financial and social resources are limited, the ability to diagnose and treat minor ailments without relying on external institutions is empowering. The remedies are accessible, requiring no appointment, prescription, or permission from a medical authority. This autonomy mirrors the Transcendentalist insistence on self-reliance, though here it emerges not from philosophical idealism but from the pragmatic realities of survival.

Smith's novel functions, perhaps unintentionally, as a vessel for preserving these practices at a time when they were already under pressure from the expanding influence of biomedicine. The early twentieth century was marked by the professionalization of medical care, the growth of pharmaceutical manufacturing, and the consolidation of authority within licensed practitioners. Folk remedies, once the primary form of care, were increasingly dismissed as outdated, unscientific, or superstitious. In *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, these remedies persist not as quaint relics but as living, functional components of family health. The narrative preserves them in vivid detail, embedding them within scenes of domestic intimacy, maternal care, and community interaction. Even when the remedies fail, or are mocked, they remain part of the household's repertoire, maintained through habit, belief, and embodied memory. From an ethnobiological standpoint, such literary preservation is invaluable. Once a practice falls out of regular use, it can disappear from living memory within a generation or two. Fiction can act as a form of cultural seedbank,

storing not only the procedural knowledge of remedies but also the emotional and social contexts in which they were applied.

Ethnobiology confronts a critical question: when a traditional remedy appears to work, is its efficacy chemical, symbolic, or both? In the case of garlic worn around the neck to ward off illness, the answer may vary depending on the perspective taken. A biomedical lens might dismiss the practice if airborne pathogens are unaffected by garlic's volatile compounds. An anthropological lens, however, might highlight its role as a protective symbol, shaping the wearer's sense of security and the community's recognition of care.

Smith's narrative does not attempt to adjudicate between these explanations. Instead, it presents them as coexisting truths. The garlic both works and does not work, depending on which standard of proof is applied. This refusal to resolve the tension reflects the reality of lived medical practice in many cultures, where symbolic efficacy is as important to healing as measurable biochemical impact. In this way, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* quietly resists the binary logic of modern medicine, where treatments are validated or dismissed solely on the basis of laboratory evidence. The novel insists, through example rather than argument, that health care exists in the space where material and symbolic actions meet, precisely the interfacial territory that ethnobiology seeks to explore.

Ethnobiology brought into dialogue with literary analysis is not simply a matter of treating novels as quirky archives of plant lore. It requires recognizing that narrative form itself shapes how knowledge is transmitted and received. Fiction works through character, setting, and plot, embedding information in human experience rather than isolating it as abstract fact. Francie Nolan remembers her mother's remedies, she is not simply recalling the steps of a procedure; she is remembering a voice, a touch, a tone of reassurance. These affective dimensions are crucial for understanding how such knowledge persists and why it is trusted. A purely scientific account of the remedy, its chemical composition, its likely effects, cannot explain its enduring presence in family life. Conversely, a purely literary account that ignores the material basis of the remedy misses an essential part of its significance.

The integration of these perspectives allows for a richer, more holistic understanding. Ethnobiology gains depth by engaging with the narrative contexts in which knowledge lives, while literary studies gain new analytical tools for examining the interplay between cultural tradition and environmental knowledge. Revisiting the Transcendentalists in light of Smith's novel, the parallels become clearer. Emerson's call for an "original relation to the universe" is mirrored in the Nolans' commitment to self-directed health care. Thoreau's refusal to submit to unjust authority echoes in the quiet defiance of ignoring mainstream medical opinion. Even the Romantic celebration of nature finds a muted expression in the reliance on natural substances, plants, herbs, and common household items, as tools for healing. The novel also resonates with the Transcendentalist critique of conformity. Emerson warned against the "hobgoblin of little minds" in the form of foolish consistency, the Nolans resist the uniform prescriptions of medical orthodoxy. Their remedies are not standardized or mass-produced; they are adapted, improvised, and responsive to the particulars of situation and experience.

The novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* suggests that ethnobiological literary analysis has much to offer beyond the documentation of historical remedies. It can illuminate the ways in which cultural identity, economic necessity, and personal agency intersect in practices of health and healing. It can reveal how fiction captures the lived complexity of medical decision-making, where choices are shaped by more than just clinical evidence. Ethnobiology continues to mature as a discipline; such interdisciplinary work can help address its lingering theoretical gaps. Ethnobiologists can explore not only the content of traditional knowledge but also the forms and genres through which it is remembered, reimagined, and sometimes reinvented. In an era when global health crises, environmental degradation, and cultural homogenization threaten both biodiversity and cultural diversity, the preservation of such knowledge, whether in oral tradition, field notes, or novels, becomes all the more urgent. Fiction may not replace

empirical study, but it can act as an essential complement, keeping alive the textures of human experience that pure data cannot capture.

Transcendentalist philosophy, early twentieth-century immigrant life, and contemporary ethnobiology might seem to inhabit separate intellectual worlds. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* reveals the connective tissue between them. All three, in their own ways, affirm the value of individual experience, the legitimacy of non-institutional knowledge, and the enduring relationship between human beings and the natural world. This meant trusting the inner voice and cultivating direct communion with nature for the transcendentalists. The Nolans, it meant trusting inherited remedies and refusing to surrender all authority to professional medicine. For ethnobiologists, it means recognizing that knowledge exists in many forms, empirical, symbolic, narrative, and that each form carries truths worth preserving. Smith's novel through this lens reveals that literature can do more than entertain or enlighten; it can serve as an ethnobiological record, a philosophical case study, and a quiet manifesto for self-reliance. In doing so, it bridges the natural and social sciences with the humanities, embodying the Renaissance spirit of integrated knowledge.

The mustard plaster on the chest, the garlic clove around the neck, the poultice warming on the stove, these are more than medical curiosities. They are stories in action, correlates in a cultural fabric, and reminders that the boundaries between science, art, and life are far more porous than modern categories suggest. In preserving them, whether through fieldwork or fiction, we preserve a set of remedies and a way of seeing the world that insists on the dignity of lived experience.

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