



# Cross-cultural Interpretation of Growth Narratives in Eastern and Western Literature Within the Context of Nature—A Case Study of *Siddhartha* and *Walden*

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## Abstract

This study employs cross-cultural analysis methods to deeply analyze *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse and *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. Starting from the context of nature, it deciphers the similarities and differences between Eastern and Western cultures in terms of the relationship between nature and character growth. The study finds that *Siddhartha* is deeply influenced by Indian religious culture, where nature symbolizes spiritual enlightenment and the cycle of life, reflecting the profound insights of Eastern culture into the universe and life. The protagonist achieves spiritual liberation in nature. *Walden*, on the other hand, demonstrates American Transcendentalism, with nature associated with individual spiritual independence and self-improvement, highlighting the importance Western culture attaches to individual values. Despite the different cultural backgrounds, the two works converge in achieving spiritual transcendence and pursuing inner peace through nature. This study opens up a new path for cross-cultural literary research, helps to understand the diversity and commonalities of human growth in different cultural backgrounds, and is of great significance for exploring the uniqueness and commonalities of the spiritual essence of Eastern and Western cultures.

## Keywords

*Siddhartha*; *Walden*; Nature; Growth Narrative; Cross-cultural Research

## 1. Introduction

In the era of globalization and the integration of diverse cultures, cross-cultural research has become a key issue in the field of literature. As classics of Eastern and Western literature, *Siddhartha* and *Walden* both use nature as the narrative background to deeply explore the eternal theme of human spiritual pursuit and growth. Cheng (2007) analyzes the ecological concepts in *Walden*, such as “self-consistent natural cycle” and “practice of a simple life”, positions the work as a foundational text of modern ecological literature, and emphasizes its pioneering significance for the construction of ecological ethics. Zhang (2019) interprets the ecological connotation of nature descriptions in *Walden*, explores how the work constructs ecological cognition through “human-nature interaction”, and discusses its reception mechanism in contemporary ecological communication. Besides, Yang (2019) explores the ecological thoughts in *Siddhartha* that integrate the Buddhist “view of dependent origination” and the Taoist “view

of nature”, and analyzes how it transforms traditional Eastern wisdom into philosophical resources for addressing modern ecological dilemmas.

*Siddhartha*, set in ancient India, shows the enlightenment of nature on spiritual liberation through the practice journey of *Siddhartha*. *Walden* reveals the value of nature for individual spiritual independence and self-improvement through Thoreau’s solitary life by the lake. Although they were born in different cultural contexts, they both unfold narratives around the relationship between man and nature and spiritual growth, containing rich cultural codes, providing precious text resources, and a broad exploration space for cross-cultural literary research. Zhao (2020), adopting a cross-cultural comparative perspective, contrasts the natural practice in *Walden* with the spiritual pursuit of nature in *Siddhartha*, and reveals the commonalities and cultural differences between the two works on the proposition of “human-nature symbiosis”.

In this paper, the author, from the perspective of cultural research, carries the values, philosophical thoughts, and aesthetic pursuits of their respective cultural systems. Through comparative analysis, we can uncover the unique thinking and common wisdom of different cultures on the proposition of nature and spirit, which is of great significance for cross-cultural literary research.

## 2. Decoding the Concept of Nature and Spiritual Pursuits in *Siddhartha*

### 2.1 Decoding Nature as the Source of Spiritual Enlightenment

In *Siddhartha*, nature is not just a simple background but a crucial source of spiritual enlightenment. Siddhartha searches for the meaning of life in nature, and natural elements such as rivers and forests are likewise mentors leading him to spiritual awakening. Influenced by Indian Buddhism and Chinese culture, Hermann Hesse endows nature with a mysterious color, making it a bridge connecting the mortal world and the spiritual world. The book describes Siddhartha listening to the sound of the river, “The river sang tirelessly, sang, and poured out in a thousand voices, in a thousand joys and sorrows, in a thousand voices familiar to Siddhartha” (p. 125). The flow, rush, and tranquility of the river mirror Siddhartha’s inner world.

Chen (2022), taking the “river” image as the core entry point, analyzes the internal connection between “the presentness of time” and “the wholeness of life” in *Siddhartha*. It points out that the “ecological view of time” constructed by Hesse through the river symbol dispels the linear logic of human conquest over nature, and reveals the dual enlightenment of its ecological wisdom of “complying with the rhythm of nature” for contemporary time anxiety and ecological crises.

Lin (2023) explores the dialogical relationship between the Buddhist concept of “dependent origination and symbiosis” and the Western pursuit of individual spirit in *Siddhartha*. It focuses on analyzing how natural scenes such as forests and rivers carry the triple symbiosis proposition of “human-nature-spirit”, and demonstrates the literary value and practical significance of the work for constructing cross-cultural ecological ethics.

Decoded from the perspective of Indian religious culture, rivers often symbolize the continuation of life and spiritual purification in Indian culture. Siddhartha’s insights by the river are a literary interpretation of the sacred meaning of the Ganges in Hinduism, embodying the idea of “harmony between man and nature.” He meditates in the forest, blending with nature, drawing strength from the endless cycle of nature, and getting rid of worldly troubles. This is the practice of the concept of conforming to nature and returning to one’s true self in Eastern religious philosophy.

### 2.2 Decoding the Symbolism of Nature and the Cycle of Life

Nature in *Siddhartha* bears the symbolic meaning of the cycle of life. Siddhartha realizes the impermanence and eternity of life from the changing seasons and the rise and fall of all things in nature, and then reflects on himself and explores the essence of life. Li (2021), in his study focusing on the “wholeness of life” symbolized by the river in *Siddhartha*, explains its ecological ethics of “embracing the flow of nature and abandoning the desire for domination”, as well as its enlightenment for solving modern ecological crises. Siddhartha describes “The seasons come and go, the trees bloom and wither. The moon waxes and wanes, the sun rises and sets every day, day after day, year after year” (p. 87). This natural cycle corresponds to the birth, growth, aging, and death of life. Decoded from the root of Indian religious culture, the cycle of life is the core doctrine of Hinduism and Buddhism, and natural phenomena become the intuitive manifestation of the cycle of life. After experiencing the prosperity and setbacks

of the world, Siddhartha once again realizes the cycle of life by the river and gains inner peace and liberation. This metaphorical expression reflects the unique understanding of the essence of life in Eastern culture and the unremitting pursuit of spiritual liberation.

### **3. Decoding the Concept of Nature and Spiritual Pursuits in *Walden***

Zhou (2016), from the perspective of academic history, this paper sorts out the promoting role of *Walden* in the development of ecological literature, demonstrates its core characteristics as a “classic of ecological literature”, and its foundational significance for later ecocritical theories.

#### **3.1 Decoding Nature and Individual Spiritual Independence**

In *Walden*, Thoreau emphasizes that nature is the cornerstone of achieving individual spiritual independence. He lives alone by the lake, getting rid of the constraints of social customs and material desires and focusing on his inner true needs. As Chen (2017) puts forward, *Walden* interprets the value of the concepts of “minimalist life” and “awe for nature” and points out their practical significance for correcting materialistic consumption values.

Thoreau firmly believes that the tranquility and freedom of nature can guide people to return to their true selves, think about the essence of life, and achieve spiritual independence. The book states, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” Decoded from the perspective of American Transcendentalist culture, nature is regarded as the direct manifestation of God, and individuals can get rid of social constraints and discover their inner divinity in nature. Thoreau builds a cabin, grows crops, and has close contact with nature. In the embrace of nature, he listens to the voice of his heart, feels the power of nature and his own insignificance from the changing natural scenes of the four seasons, and cherishes spiritual independence and freedom even more. This is the practice of Transcendentalist thought.

#### **3.2 Decoding the Promotion of Nature to Self-improvement**

The natural environment of Walden Lake helps Thoreau with self-improvement. He observes nature, interacts with it, reflects on the problems of human society, and improves his moral and spiritual realm. Thoreau observes the living habits of birds by the lake and thinks about the competition and cooperation in human society; he observes the clarity and turbidity of the lake water and reflects on the damage humans cause to the environment. He reads and writes in nature and gains inspiration from the tranquility of nature to improve his ideological system. As he wrote, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived”. Decoded from the perspective of Transcendentalist thought, nature is the source of human moral and spiritual growth. Through direct contact with nature, individuals can transcend the material world and achieve self-improvement. This is a breakthrough in the traditional Western philosophical concept of the dichotomy between man and nature, and also a critical reflection on the current situation of materialism and spiritual poverty in modern society.

### **4. Decoding the Similarities and Differences in the Concepts of Nature and Spiritual Pursuits of the Two Works**

#### **4.1 Similarities in Growth: Nature Facilitates Spiritual Sublimation and the Pursuit of Inner Peace**

In terms of decoding the realization of spiritual sublimation through nature, the protagonists of both works achieve spiritual sublimation through nature. Siddhartha realizes the true meaning of life in nature and achieves spiritual liberation. Thoreau gets rid of material constraints in nature and improves his spiritual realm. Nature has universal value in human spiritual growth and is the convergence point of the spiritual pursuits of Eastern and Western cultures. Siddhartha realizes the meaning of “Om” by the river and achieves harmony with the universe; Thoreau converses with nature by Walden Lake and understands the true meaning of a simple life. Decoded from the essence of human spiritual needs, regardless of Eastern or Western cultures, nature provides spiritual nourishment for humans, helping people break through the limitations of reality and achieve spiritual transcendence.

In the aspect of decoding the pursuit of inner peace, the protagonists of both works pursue inner peace in nature.

Siddhartha stays away from the hustle and bustle of the world and seeks spiritual comfort in the tranquility of nature; Thoreau lives alone by the lake, avoids social disturbances, and gains inner peace in the embrace of nature. This reflects the common yearning of human beings for a spiritual home and the reflection and resistance to the fast-paced and high-pressure life of modern society. Whether it is Siddhartha meditating in the forest or Thoreau contemplating by the lake, they are all ways of seeking inner peace in nature. Decoded from a psychological perspective, the natural environment can soothe human tension and meet the inner desire for tranquility. It is a haven for the human spirit.

#### 4.2 Differences in Growth: Different Cultural Roots, Attitudes towards Nature, Narrative Styles, and Social Influences

First, in the topic of decoding different cultural roots, the concept of nature in *Siddhartha* is influenced by Indian religious culture. Concepts such as the cycle of life and spiritual liberation are closely related to the ideas of Indian Buddhism and Hinduism, reflecting the awe and profound understanding of Eastern culture towards the universe and life. *Walden* embodies American Transcendentalist thought, emphasizing the direct connection between the individual and nature, the inner divinity of humans, and the transcendence of the self, reflecting the unique exploration of Western culture in individual values and spiritual pursuits. In *Siddhartha*, Siddhartha seeks liberation in nature following the Indian religious practice methods; in *Walden*, Thoreau emphasizes individual independence and self-realization in nature based on American Transcendentalism. Decoded from the context of cultural development, Indian religious culture has been passed down for thousands of years, forming a unique cosmology and outlook on life; American Transcendentalism is a rethinking of the relationship between the individual, nature, and society after the Western Enlightenment.

In terms of decoding differences in attitudes towards nature, in *Siddhartha*, nature is regarded as a mysterious and revelatory existence, and Siddhartha passively accepts the teachings of nature with awe, mostly gaining insights into nature. In *Walden*, Thoreau not only has awe and love for nature but also actively uses nature to achieve personal values and spiritual pursuits, regarding nature as a tool for self-growth and transcendence. Siddhartha mainly gains insights in nature, while Thoreau takes active actions on the basis of insights. Decoded from the perspective of cultural values, Eastern culture emphasizes conforming to nature and respecting the authority of nature; Western culture, while respecting nature, pays more attention to giving full play to human subjective initiative and using nature to achieve its own goals.

For decoding narrative styles and techniques, *Siddhartha* adopts a poetic and mysterious narrative style, showing spiritual exploration through inner monologues, dreams, and dialogues with others. Hesse uses symbolic and metaphorical techniques to endow natural elements with profound spiritual connotations. *Walden* combines delicate natural descriptions, rational thinking, and humorous writing styles, recording life by the lake while interspersing critical reflections on society and life. Thoreau uses the diary style to make the work realistic and intimate. Decoded from the tradition of literary creation, *Siddhartha* is influenced by Eastern literature, which focuses on inner feelings and pursues mysterious artistic conceptions; *Walden* reflects the Western literary tradition of paying attention to real life and rational thinking.

Last but not least, *Siddhartha* inspires people's exploration of the inner spiritual world in the Eastern cultural circle, promotes the spread and understanding of religious thoughts such as Buddhism and Hinduism, and becomes a window for the West to understand Eastern culture and philosophy. *Walden* has triggered people's thinking about simple life, environmental protection, and individual spiritual independence in the United States and around the world, promoted the development of the American Transcendentalist movement, and provided a reference for people in modern society to pursue spiritual freedom. Decoded from the perspective of social and cultural influence, *Siddhartha* promotes the spiritual exploration within Eastern culture and enhances cross-cultural exchanges between the East and the West; *Walden* influences the values of American society and has a positive impact on global trends of environmental protection and individual spiritual pursuit.

#### 5. Conclusion

*Siddhartha* and *Walden* use nature as the stage to depict the unremitting pursuit of the spiritual world by people in the context of Eastern and Western cultures. They show that Eastern and Western cultures have both uniqueness and commonalities in terms of the concept of nature and spiritual pursuits.

As Zhang (2015) integrates the ecological philosophy and transforms the concept of “nature as a spiritual home” into ecological practice, providing ideological resources for the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature in the contemporary era. Through cross-cultural decoding, we can deeply understand the connotations of nature and spiritual pursuits in Indian culture and American Transcendentalist culture and gain insights into the common aspiration of human beings to achieve spiritual growth through nature. Despite different cultural backgrounds, nature has always been an indispensable partner in the process of human growth. Through in-depth analysis of these two works, we can more profoundly understand the diversity and commonalities of human growth in different cultures. No matter what cultural environment an individual is in, nature can provide strength and inspiration for our own growth and transcendence.

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