Analyzing the Similarities and Differences of the Image of "Beans" in *Walden* and *Back to Country Life*

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Abstract: This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the symbolic image of "beans" in Henry David Thoreau's The Bean-field from *Walden* and Tao Yuanming's ancient Chinese poem *Back to Country Life*, revealing how these seemingly simple plants embody concrete philosophical and cultural meanings across time and space. Despite their temporal and geographical distance, both authors use bean imagery to articulate shared ideals of simplicity, self-sufficiency, and harmony with nature. This study begins with an overview of the general symbolic values associated with beans—vitality, harvest, tranquility, independence, and transformation—before delving into textual analyses of each work. Tao's depiction of sparse bean sprouts amidst overgrown grass mirrors his longing for pastoral purity and detachment from societal constraints, while Thoreau's detailed engagement with bean cultivation reflects his transcendentalist pursuit of spiritual clarity through labor and natural communion. Despite differences in style and historical context, both writers present beans as more than agricultural products; they become metaphors for personal freedom, moral integrity, and a life reoriented toward nature. By decoding the literary symbolism of beans, this research not only highlights cross-cultural literary resonances but also deepens our understanding of ecological thought and human-nature relations in both Western and Eastern traditions. Ultimately, the paper argues that beans serve as a shared language through which Tao and Thoreau articulate a universal yearning for a simpler, more authentic mode of existence.

Keywords: Pastoralism; transcendentalism; cross-cultural imagery

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research background

Recent ecological and cultural debates have renewed interest in comparing agrarian imagery and pastoral ideals across literary traditions. Although Tao Yuanming and Henry David Thoreau lived in vastly different cultural and historical contexts, their respective works— *Back to Country Life* and *Walden* both reveal a philosophical resonance grounded in reverence for nature, simplicity, and self-sufficiency. (Zhang, 2023, p. 49). Both authors responded to the chaos of their times by retreating from public life and turning to rural labor as a form of coexistence with nature echoes across the centuries, forming what scholars describe as a "dialogue across time and space" (Zhang, 2017, p. 72).

1.2 Research objectives

This paper focuses on the symbolic image of beans as represented in the works of Tao and Thoreau. While Tao describes sparse bean sprouts growing in overgrown grass as a metaphor for the struggles of a virtuous recluse in a corrupt world, Thoreau uses his bean rows as a site of moral labor and spiritual exploration (Feng & Wu, 2023, p. 95). Despite differences in motivation—Tao's withdrawal rooted in Confucian-Daoist ethics, and Thoreau's rebellion shaped by Transcendentalist philosophy—both authors elevate the mundane act of planting beans into a literary expression of personal autonomy and ecological reverence (Zhang, 2023, p. 50). Their language is plain and unadorned, imitating the rhythm of labor and reflecting a poetic vision rooted in real soil and hardship (Zhang, 2017, pp. 74–75).

1.3 Research significance

Beyond comparing two texts, the study addresses ecological ethics, cultural translation, and the long-standing quest for spiritual freedom. The figure of the recluse—whether navigating the southern mountains of China or hoeing bean rows by Walden Pond—invites us to reconsider the human-nature relationship in both Eastern and Western traditions (Zhao, 2024, p. 49; Zhang, 2023, p. 51). By examining the symbolic function of beans and their associated agrarian practices, this paper aims to illuminate how both Tao and Thoreau use pastoral imagery to critique material excess, affirm individual integrity, and envision alternative models of living. Ultimately, such a comparison not only enriches our understanding of literary ecology but also offers enduring insight into the ethical and philosophical values embedded in both Chinese and American traditions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Comparative studies of hermit philosophy in Tao and Thoreau

A significant portion of existing scholarship on Tao Yuanming and Henry David Thoreau emphasizes the philosophical commonalities between the two authors, particularly their shared endorsement of retreat,

simplicity, and personal freedom. Zhang (2017) draws a broad cultural parallel, noting that despite the vast temporal and spatial distance, both authors articulate a pastoral ideal rooted in self-cultivation and detachment from worldly affairs. Similarly, Zhang (2023) interprets their respective withdrawals as expressions of existential clarity— "resolving contradiction by removing oneself from contradiction" (p. 49). These studies frame the two writers as spiritual kin, echoing classical notions of the recluse figure in both Eastern and Western traditions.

In a more theoretical attempt, Huang (2020) applies Maslow's hierarchy of needs to explain both authors' turn toward rural solitude. She argues that Tao and Thoreau's reclusive behaviors align with the pursuit of self-actualization rather than mere survival or escapism. This interdisciplinary method opens an insightful psychological perspective on their shared inner motives (Huang, 2020, p. 80). However, despite the appeal of this framework, the study remains largely detached from close textual reading or aesthetic inquiry.

While these philosophical comparisons have enriched our understanding of Tao and Thoreau's ideological affinities, they share a common limitation: an overreliance on macro-level analysis. These studies prioritize metaphysical and ethical reflections while overlooking the textual mechanisms through which such ideas are articulated. They seldom engage with literary form, symbolic imagery, or language structure—dimensions crucial to understanding how meaning is constructed in both poetic and prose contexts. As such, the symbolic role of beans, a recurring motif in both authors' works, has yet to receive adequate attention as a site of cross-cultural literary negotiation.

2.2 Ecological and ethical interpretations of labor

Another strand of scholarship explores the symbolic dimensions of agricultural labor in Thoreau's writings, particularly within ecological and ethical frameworks. Zhao (2024), for instance, interprets bean cultivation in Walden as an embodiment of Thoreau's ecological consciousness, emphasizing the harmony between the individual and the environment. For Zhao, the bean-field is not merely a place of sustenance but a moral landscape, where labor serves as a medium for self-refinement and spiritual resilience. Likewise, Huang (2020) observes that Thoreau's work ethic in the field reflects a higher-order psychological need, linking physical toil with personal transcendence.

A more politically charged reading is offered by Chen (2021), who regards Thoreau's agricultural experiment as a symbolic rebellion against capitalist and governmental encroachments. In this view, the bean-field becomes a microcosm of civil disobedience—a deliberate site where individual autonomy confronts societal conformity (Chen, 2021, p. 134). These perspectives highlight how the act of planting beans transcends mere subsistence and becomes an ideological gesture, loaded with environmental, spiritual, and political significance.

However, despite their theoretical richness, these studies tend to treat labor—and by extension, the beans themselves—as thematic devices rather than aesthetic objects. They emphasize the ethical and political messages encoded in the act of cultivation but rarely explore how these meanings are conveyed through language, form, or literary structure. Moreover, most of these interpretations remain confined to Thoreau's text, with little attempt to compare analogous symbolic systems in other literary traditions. The lack of a cross-cultural literary framework limits the potential to understand bean cultivation as a universally resonant yet culturally distinct motif.

2.3 Symbolic readings within single textual contexts

In addition to broader philosophical and ecological readings, some studies have attempted more focused

interpretations of the bean motif within a single cultural and literary context. Feng and Wu (2023) offer a detailed exegesis of the line "grass flourishes while bean sprouts are sparse" from Tao Yuanming's *Back to Country Life*. They argue that this line encapsulates the tension between the poet's pastoral ideal and the harsh reality of rural labor, symbolizing both Tao's ethical perseverance and the encroachment of disorderly external forces. The beans, in this context, serve as an emblem of personal resolve and harmony with nature amidst political disillusionment (Feng & Wu, 2023, p. 94).

On the other hand, Chen (2021) approaches the bean-field in *Walden* through a politically charged lens, positioning it as a performative symbol of dissent and autonomy. He reads Thoreau's agricultural endeavor as a resistance to industrial capitalism and an assertion of moral individuality, where beans become vehicles of anti-establishment values. While such studies provide valuable insights into the symbolic potential of the bean motif, they remain bound to the cultural logic and hermeneutics of a single author.

These analyses also tend to reduce the symbolic function of beans to a singular thematic axis—be it perseverance, harmony, or rebellion—without acknowledging the polysemous nature of literary symbols. The meanings of beans, like all literary motifs, are shaped not only by their local cultural environment but also by rhetorical choices, narrative framing, and historical reception. Moreover, no current studies juxtapose Tao Yuanming and Thoreau through the lens of this shared yet differentially constructed image, missing a key opportunity to explore how a common natural object can be invested with distinct cultural meanings across time and space.

2.4 Bridging the gap: a rhetorical and comparative approach

Building on the limitations of previous studies, this paper advances a rhetorical-symbolic and cross-cultural approach to the bean motif in the works of Tao Yuanming and Henry David Thoreau, grounded in the comparative methodologies of imagology and comparative poetics. Earlier scholarship has often prioritized philosophical alignment, ecological ethics, or political dissent, yet seldom has it interrogated how symbolic meaning is meticulously constructed through rhetorical texture, literary form, and narrative positioning. Moreover, much of the existing literature remains mono-cultural or unidirectional, lacking a sustained comparative lens that illuminates both the convergences and divergences of symbolic functions across Chinese and American traditions.

This study thus adopts a rhetorical-symbolic method, which merges rhetorical analysis—how authors employ language, structure, and style to shape meaning and influence readers—with symbolic interpretation, which probes the deeper significance of images or motifs and their role in articulating themes and cultural values. By integrating these approaches, the analysis moves beyond simply asking what "beans" symbolize in each work to examine how each author's distinctive narrative and poetic strategies construct those meanings. In this sense, the bean becomes not merely a motif but a site for cross-cultural semantic negotiation.

The cross-cultural dimension of this framework is informed by the central aims of Comparative Literature: to transcend the confines of any single linguistic or national tradition and treat literature as a global, dialogic enterprise (Wellek, 1963). As René Wellek has argued, comparative literature should be "unhampered by linguistic restrictions," while David Damrosch and Earl Miner have called for a comparative methodology that resists Eurocentric canons and mono-methodological constraints, advocating instead for intercultural perspectives

capable of registering the pluralism of world literatures (Damrosch, 2003; Miner, 1990). Imagology, as a subfield of comparative literature, further provides a systematic model for the study of "cross-national perceptions and images as expressed in literary discourse" (Beller & Leerssen, 2007, p. 7). This perspective makes it possible to interpret the "bean" as an ethnotype: a culturally coded image that reveals both the author's auto-image (self-perception) and hetero-image (perception of the other).

Comparative poetics, particularly as articulated by Earl Miner, supplements this model by shifting the focus from universal themes to the "originative poetics" of distinct literary traditions. Miner (1990) urges critics to attend to the differing literary sensibilities—such as the affective-expressive tendencies in much Eastern literature and the mimetic orientation of Western poetics—rather than seeking facile equivalences. This enables a more nuanced comparative reading that is sensitive to both structural and stylistic differences.

By synthesizing these approaches, this study undertakes a close reading of Tao Yuanming's *Back to Country Life* and Thoreau's "The Bean-Field" not merely as philosophical treatises but as intricately structured literary expressions. Through the rhetorical-symbolic lens, the analysis explores how the humble bean is transformed into a charged site of meaning through layered textual strategies: the rhythmical mimicry of labor, spatial and narrative positioning within the poetic or prose structure, and the mobilization of embedded cultural codes that guide the reader's understanding of labor, selfhood, and nature.

For example, Tao's depiction of sparse bean sprouts beneath luxuriant grass transcends the agrarian and becomes a metaphor for moral solitude, shaped by a Confucian-Daoist ethos that values restraint, suggestion, and the negotiation between virtue and failure. Thoreau's meticulously described rows of beans, by contrast, stand as emblems of moral experimentation and self-reliance, articulated through a transcendentalist prose style that privileges self-reflexive inquiry and mythic amplification. Here, the bean field is not just a plot of earth but a site for the remapping of ethical and ecological identities.

Such a rhetorical-symbolic comparison expands the semantic field of the bean motif and forges a dialogue between Eastern and Western traditions, privileging literary form and rhetorical construction over mere philosophical abstraction. It opens up new interpretive possibilities for understanding how shared natural imagery—such as the bean—can operate divergently across cultures, shaped by distinctive rhetorical and poetic conventions. In doing so, this framework contributes to comparative literature, ecocriticism, and symbolic poetics by offering a more granular, text-centered model for the interpretation of cross-cultural literary symbolism, grounded in rigorous theoretical foundations and attentive close reading.

3. Textual Analysis — The Rhetorical Symbolism of Beans

3.1 The symbolic function of beans in Tao Yuanming's Back to Country Life

3.1.1 Image construction

In *Back to Country Life*, the image of beans is not merely a literal reference to a cultivated crop but a multilayered symbolic construct that emerges through Tao Yuanming's concise yet evocative poetic diction. The iconic opening line, "Planting beans beneath the southern mountain, Grass grows thick while bean sprouts are sparse", establishes a vivid scene of tension between human cultivation and natural overgrowth. On the surface,

it suggests agricultural hardship; however, at a symbolic level, the sparse bean seedlings may be read as a reflection of the poet's marginalized idealism within a chaotic and disordered world. The overpowering grass represents the unchecked encroachment of secular society or officialdom, which stifles the fragile shoots of integrity and simplicity Tao attempts to cultivate.

Tao's use of juxtaposition—between the human and non-human, sparse and dense, order and disorder—lays the foundation for beans as a signifier of resistance. In Chinese poetic tradition, the act of "planting" often connotes both literal subsistence and a figurative sowing of values. The fact that Tao chooses beans, a modest and unglamorous crop, further reinforces his commitment to a humble, self-sufficient life that deliberately distances itself from Confucian hierarchy and worldly success. Beans become markers of a dignified yet precarious retreat.

Moreover, the placement of beans within Tao's broader spatial imagination reinforces their symbolic load. The phrase "southern mountain" is not only geographical but inter-textual; it echoes the Book of Songs and other early Chinese pastoral poetry where mountains represent constancy, refuge, and elevated morality. Planting beans at the foot of such a mountain becomes an act of symbolic alignment: Tao positions himself at the margin of worldly affairs but within moral elevation. The bean thus stands as an agent of this positioning—it is the poet's bridge between material life and ethical identity.

Importantly, the daily rhythms of tending to the bean field, as described in "In the morning I clear the wilds, /With the moon I return, hoe in hand" imbue the image of beans with emotional and ethical weight. They are not just agricultural output, but companions in the poet's spiritual discipline. This labor, rendered in minimal yet rhythmic language, becomes a ritual of self-purification, a slow and silent form of self-writing. Beans absorb Tao's temporal investment and, in turn, reflect his moral constancy. Here, Tao prefigures what would later be termed by ecocritics as a "relational ontology"—one in which the human subject defines itself not in opposition to nature, but through its embeddedness within it.

Thus, the image of beans in *Back to Country Life* is carefully constructed through spatial alignment, natural contrast, and poetic ritual. Far from being a passive crop, the bean emerges as a quiet but potent symbol of Tao Yuanming's ethical solitude, existential resilience, and poetic minimalism. It stands not for agricultural success, but for a life lived with deliberate refusal—a vegetative metaphor for the recluse who chooses slowness, quietness, and obscurity over the noise of court and capital.

3.1.2 Rhetorical strategies in the construction of the bean image

The symbolic resonance of beans in Tao Yuanming's *Back to Country Life* is not solely embedded in thematic content but emerges equally from the rhetorical strategies employed to shape the poem's tone, rhythm, and imagery. Through parallel structure, temporal contrast, and imagistic economy, Tao constructs a poetics of quiet resistance—one in which beans function as the metonymic center of a larger ethical and aesthetic worldview.

One of Tao's key rhetorical devices is temporal juxtaposition, especially in the line "I rise in the morning to clear the wilds, Return with hoe under the moon". The carefully balanced structure not only underscores the cyclical labor of a farmer but also evokes a sense of poetic eternity: a solitary figure bound not by clock or calendar but by the rhythms of the earth. The beans are not described directly in this couplet, yet they are the silent purpose behind every movement. In this way, Tao constructs a rhetoric of omission—the central image

(beans) is emotionally and ethically elevated by its partial absence. This strategy creates a reflective distance that invites readers to intuit the moral significance rather than absorb it didactically.

Another key rhetorical feature is Tao's consistent use of antithesis and contrast to evoke an inner tension between aspiration and adversity. In the opening couplet, the rhythmical opposition between flourishing and sparse does more than describe a rural scene—it dramatizes a worldview. The lushness of wild grass versus the fragility of cultivated beans reflects Tao's conflict with the external world: secular forces multiply wildly, while moral cultivation struggles to take root. This rhetorical contrast functions as a microcosmic allegory, rendering political disillusionment into botanical form.

Tao also employs a flattened effect that belies the poem's underlying depth. His diction is deceptively plain, eschewing metaphors or overt emotion in favor of everyday language and routine verbs like plant, clear, and return. This linguistic restraint is itself rhetorical—a stylistic embodiment of Tao's moral position. As Zhang (2017) notes, this simplicity "creates a resistance to rhetorical flourish and official decorum," allowing Tao to assert a literary identity that mirrors his reclusive stance (p. 73). The bean, humble and unadorned, is thus perfectly suited to this aesthetic.

Even the closing couplet, "My clothes are wet, but I do not mind, As long as my wish is not betrayed", employs rhetorical indirection to elevate the bean from mundane crop to moral symbol. The image of dew-wet clothing, incidental yet intimate, places the speaker in tactile continuity with his environment. The phrase "my wish is not betrayed" is notably abstract, leaving the content of the wish unspecified. This strategic vagueness opens the symbol of the bean to broader ethical readings—it becomes the object, process, and fulfillment of a moral vow whose contours are determined by the reader's own values.

3.2 The symbolic function of beans in Thoreau's The Bean-Field

3.2.1 Narrative presence in Thoreau's The Bean-Field

In *Walden*, Thoreau devotes an entire chapter— "The Bean-Field"—to the seemingly mundane task of cultivating beans, a narrative decision that immediately elevates the crop to symbolic prominence. Unlike Tao Yuanming's elliptical poetic style, Thoreau adopts an essayistic mode, blending observation, reflection, and philosophical speculation. The bean-field is not merely a background for labor; it is narratively central, functioning as both spatial anchor and metaphysical testing ground within the Walden experiment.

Thoreau introduces his bean cultivation with precise material detail— "seven miles already planted"—but quickly departs from agronomic record-keeping to pose the question: "What shall I learn of beans or beans of me?" (Thoreau, 1964, p. 129). This reflective turn transforms beans into subjects of inquiry rather than objects of utility. Their presence in the narrative is dialogic: they are not only cultivated, but contemplated. This narrative structure positions beans as co-authors of meaning—entities that offer lessons about patience, cyclicality, resistance, and the nature of self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, the bean-field chapter is embedded in Walden at a crucial point in the text's philosophical arc. Following earlier chapters on "Economy" and "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," the focus on beans serves as a concrete instantiation of Transcendentalist principles. The labor is literal, but the narration makes it emblematic. Thoreau writes, "They attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Antaeus" (p. 129), invoking myth to signal spiritual empowerment through manual engagement with nature. Here, beans are

narratively charged: they signify rootedness, mythic force, and the reclaiming of primal identity. Their symbolic power arises not from abstraction, but from narrative accumulation—Thoreau's repeated interactions with beans imbue them with layered meaning.

The recurrence of the bean motif also reflects Thoreau's resistance to linear, utilitarian thinking. He admits uncertainty about their purpose— "But why should I raise them? Only Heaven knows"—and then immediately returns to detailing their care. This rhetorical oscillation between purpose and purposelessness mirrors the Transcendentalist tension between individual action and cosmic unknowability. Beans are narrated not as productive endpoints but as companions in existential experimentation. The very uncertainty of their significance is part of their narrative power—they remain "curious labor," simultaneously ordinary and metaphysical.

Notably, Thoreau's bean-field narrative resonates with his broader ethos of individual conscience and resistance to societal norms. At one point, Thoreau wryly observes that he is "by nature a Pythagorean, so far as beans are concerned, whether they mean porridge or voting", implying that his farming is as much a rejection of political participation (beans as ballots) as it is an embrace of simple subsistence. Such remarks underscore how the bean-field becomes a microcosm of Thoreau's experiment in self-reliance and civil disobedience. Indeed, during his Walden sojourn, Thoreau was briefly jailed for refusing to pay a poll tax to a government he deemed unjust—an incident that symbolically parallels his agricultural self-sufficiency as an act of personal autonomy and moral protest. Literary scholars have noted these dimensions: for example, Lawrence Buell interprets Thoreau's bean-field labor as exemplifying an "aesthetic of relinquishment," a deliberate yielding of human ownership and control over nature's produce. In the chapter's climax, Thoreau muses that the beans do not ultimately belong to him alone: "These beans have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly? … The true husbandman will cease from anxiety … relinquishing all claim to the produce of his fields". Such passages illustrate the environmental ethic Buell identifies: Thoreau relinquishes any proprietary anxiety, treating his labor as a spiritual exercise rather than a means of economic gain. At the same time, Henry Golemba observes that Thoreau's style in *Walden* is "very natural"—both intricate and simple at once. This natural, unadorned rhetoric creates a sense of intimacy and authenticity that blurs the boundary between personal narrative and broader social commentary. Through these textual strategies and philosophical underpinnings, Thoreau's cultivation of beans comes to signify not just physical toil, but a holistic practice of ecological consciousness, transcendental self-culture, and principled dissent.

3.2.2 Language andtone in Thoreau's The Bean-Field

Thoreau's language in "The Bean-Field" oscillates between observational precision and lyrical abstraction, a tonal duality that mirrors the dual status of beans as both agricultural product and spiritual metaphor. Unlike Tao Yuanming's controlled poetic minimalism, Thoreau adopts a meditative prose style that allows him to expand, qualify, and contradict himself—thus reflecting the experiential texture of his "life experiment." This stylistic openness is central to how beans accrue symbolic weight in the narrative.

His tone, often informal and conversational, invites the reader to join in his ambiguity: "What shall I learn of beans or beans of me?" (Thoreau, 1964, p. 129). This seemingly rhetorical question destabilizes traditional subject—object hierarchies and infuses the mundane task of hoeing beans with philosophical uncertainty. The tone here is both sincere and ironic—Thoreau doubts, yet continues; he questions, yet persists. This self-aware ambivalence is characteristic of Transcendentalist rhetoric, in which nature is not explained to the reader so much

as it is inhabited and reflected upon by the narrator.

Thoreau frequently uses domestic, tactile language to describe his physical relationship with the beans: "I hoe them, early and late, I have an eye to them… This is my day's work." The simplicity of these statements contrasts with the elevated moral purpose ascribed to the task elsewhere in the same chapter. This dissonance creates a unique tonal register—one where the sacred is rendered in the idiom of the ordinary. His tone resists both sermon and satire, opting instead for a kind of philosophical plainness that allows beans to be both literal and symbolic without collapsing into simple allegory.

Additionally, Thoreau incorporates mythic and anthropomorphic language to imbue the beans with narrative vitality. By invoking Antaeus— "they attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Antaeus"—he casts the bean-field as a site of mythopoetic renewal (Thoreau, 1964, p. 129). The beans are no longer passive producers; they become the agents through which Thoreau reclaims his spiritual and bodily autonomy. This elevated tone coexists with moments of rustic humor and personal frustration, such as his battle with invasive woodchucks, which keeps the symbolic register grounded in lived reality.

Crucially, Thoreau's tone does not force meaning upon the beans but allows it to emerge inductively through layered observation, repetition, and pause. His language avoids rigid abstraction, instead leaning on accumulation: of rows, labor, words. As a result, the symbolic function of beans develops organically—not through overt analogy, but through tonal and syntactic patterning. His prose thus enacts the same slow growth he attributes to the beans themselves.

3.3 Cross-cultural comparison: resonances and divergences

3.3.1 Shared symbolism

Despite the vast differences in their cultural and historical contexts, Tao Yuanming and Henry David Thoreau converge in their use of beans as symbolic vehicles to express ideals of self-sufficiency, rootedness in nature, and ethical independence. Both authors integrate the humble bean into their literary landscapes not merely as an agricultural detail but as a spiritually charged emblem of a life removed from corrupting entanglements. This cross-cultural resonance exemplifies what comparative poetics describes as a transhistorical convergence of imagery (Miner, 1990), even as each instance remains grounded in its own cultural milieu. In imagological terms, the bean functions almost as a transnational imageme bridging Chinese and American pastoral visions (Beller & Leerssen, 2007, p. 7). By examining the texts closely, we see that Tao and Thoreau independently transform bean-planting into a metaphor for personal renewal and moral autonomy, indicating a shared symbolic grammar across East—West boundaries.

At the heart of both works is the ideal of self-sufficiency realized through manual labor and minimal reliance on outside institutions. Tao's depiction of cultivating beans at the foot of his rustic farm is more than an agrarian scene — it is a declaration of philosophical autonomy shaped by the Confucian-Daoist tradition of withdrawal. In his poem Back to Country Life, the act of tending "bean sprouts amidst overgrown grass" is imbued with the resolve of a recluse who has renounced official duty. Similarly, Thoreau's daily attention to his bean rows — "early and late I have an eye to them" (Thoreau, 1964, p. 129) — becomes a ritual of spiritual independence. By growing his own food at Walden Pond, Thoreau turns his back on the market economy and government interference, enacting what Lawrence Buell terms an environmental "aesthetic of relinquishment". In both texts,

beans symbolize a deliberate withdrawal from societal systems: Tao quietly resists the bureaucratic officialdom he left behind, and Thoreau pointedly critiques the cash economy and social conformity of his America. Their bean-fields are thus sites of ethical self-reliance, where sustenance and meaning are derived on the individual's own terms. This convergence aligns with Earl Miner's call for intercultural literary analysis that recognizes common human concerns without obscuring cultural distinctiveness (Miner, 1990).

Another parallel emerges in the portrayal of beans as anchors of human—nature interdependence. For Tao, the humble bean mediates between human aspiration and natural constraint. He pointedly describes how his sparse seedlings struggle amid luxuriant weeds, suggesting both vulnerability and quiet perseverance — qualities that mirror his own spiritual stance as a retiree cultivating purity in a tainted world. The bean patch is a living threshold between the recluse and the wilderness, illustrating what Clifford Geertz might describe as a symbol embedded in a "web of significance" unique to Tao's cultural setting (Geertz, 1973). Thoreau, in turn, imagines his bean-field as a literal "portion of the earth's surface" from which he draws strength "like Antaeus" (Thoreau, 1964, p. 129). In *Walden*, the beans "attached me to the earth," Thoreau writes, underscoring how tending crops roots him physically and spiritually in the land. This entwining of farmer and field prefigures what ecocritic Timothy Morton calls the "ecological thought," the recognition of an inextricable mesh linking human and nonhuman life (Morton, 2010). Neither author treats beans as passive foodstuffs; rather, beans become active agents through which the writers ground themselves in nature's cyclical processes. From an ecocritical perspective, both texts depict agriculture as a form of communion with the environment — an insight that modern environmental critics like Buell see as foundational to early ecological literature.

Both Tao and Thoreau also invest the bean with an aura of spiritual clarity and moral discipline. In Tao's verse, the rhythms of daily farm labor — rising at dawn to hoe, returning under moonlight — are recounted with a calm, measured cadence. This meditative repetition of humble tasks functions as a mode of self-cultivation: the poetic simplicity of Tao's language (eschewing elaborate metaphors or hyperbole) mirrors the purification of the self through rustic discipline. Each stooping to pull weeds or carrying a hoe becomes an almost ritual act, aligning with the Confucian ideal that virtue is honed through everyday practice. Thoreau's narrative of bean-hoeing likewise conveys a dual discipline of body and soul. He notes, for instance, "I cherish them, I hoe them… and this is my day's work" (Thoreau, 1964, p. 129), elevating mundane farm chores to ethical exercise. The chapter's detailed log of planting, weeding, and guarding the beans — even to the point of battling woodchucks and weeds — underscores a moral rigor in Thoreau's experiment. By devoting himself to this "small Herculean labor" of cultivating beans, Thoreau pursues what he elsewhere calls "sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence" in the guise of seeds sown in the earth. In both texts, then, the bean-field becomes a microcosm of self-discipline: a place where working the soil equates to refining one's character. As one scholar observes, Tao and Thoreau share "a reverence for daily labor as a path to ethical life" (Zhang, 2017, p. 74), suggesting a cross-cultural recognition that virtue grows out of patient, repetitive engagement with the land. This theme also resonates with symbolic anthropology's emphasis on ritual labor as meaning-making practice (Geertz, 1973), reinforcing that the significance of beans arises through the patterned actions of planting and tending.

Finally, in both works beans function as literary tools of refusal — modest symbols through which the authors contest dominant values of their respective eras. Tao's decision to cultivate beans underlies his rejection of the careerism and material ambition of court life. The simple act of farming becomes, in his poetic

framework, a gentle protest against a society mired in corruption and ambition. By growing beans in obscurity, Tao enacts the Daoist principle of "non-action" (wuwei) — a withdrawal from artificial striving that itself constitutes a moral critique. In Thoreau's case, the bean-field is explicitly used to reject capitalist and political norms. Thoreau pointedly notes that he did not raise beans for profit or even sustenance ("not that I wanted beans to eat, for I am by nature a Pythagorean… so far as beans are concerned, whether they mean porridge or voting" (Thoreau, 1964, p. 130), humorously equating beans with ballots to signal his abstention from both commercial farming and conventional politics. He even questions his own right to tamper with the land, asking: "What right had I to oust johnswort and the rest, and break up their ancient herb garden?" (Thoreau, 1964, p. 130), thereby critiquing notions of private property and dominion over nature. Such passages show Thoreau transforming bean cultivation into a quiet act of dissent: a refusal to measure life by profit, expansion, or social approval. In both authors' hands, the lowly bean is revalued from an insignificant crop to a symbol of principle. It becomes an anti-monument — an unassuming, regenerative sign that opposes the grandiose metrics of success endorsed by emperors or capitalists. By celebrating the bean's very insignificance, Tao and Thoreau both undermine the prevailing hierarchies of value (wealth, power, status) and affirm integrity, humility, and harmony as superior ideals. In imagological perspective, the bean thus serves as a shared cross-cultural symbol through which each author communicates a culturally specific form of resistance (Beller & Leerssen, 2007).

In sum, the bean emerges in *Back to Country Life* and "The Bean-Field" as a polyvalent symbol embodying self-reliance, ecological attunement, spiritual clarity, and quietly radical critique. It functions not only as a literal plant but as a carefully cultivated sign — an ethical, philosophical, and aesthetic marker of each author's chosen path of retreat. This shared symbolic repertoire confirms a deep transhistorical resonance between Tao and Thoreau: both articulate through the image of beans a universal yearning for simplicity and authenticity. At the same time, as comparative theorists remind us, such resonances do not erase difference. The very notion of a "shared language" of pastoral symbolism must be balanced with attention to divergent expressive contexts (Miner, 1990). Thus, having traced how beans signify analogous values in the two works, we must also examine how each author's rhetoric and literary form shapes the meaning of the bean in distinctly different ways.

3.3.2 Divergent rhetorics

While Tao Yuanming and Thoreau find common ground in the symbolic significance of beans, the rhetorical strategies and literary forms through which they construct this symbolism differ markedly. These divergences arise from contrasts in genre (classical Chinese poem versus American prose essay), cultural aesthetic principles, and each writer's relationship to language and authority. As Earl Miner's comparative poetics suggests, each literary tradition possesses its own "originative poetics" and sensibility (Miner, 1990). In this case, Tao's laconic pastoral verse and Thoreau's expansive transcendentalist prose represent two distinct modes of engaging the same motif. Likewise, Clifford Geertz's insight that meaning is embedded in cultural "webs of significance" (Geertz, 1973) reminds us that a symbol like the bean will be realized through the particular rhetorical habits of its author's milieu. Therefore, what the bean means is inseparable from how Tao and Thoreau talk about it. In this section, the focus shifts from thematic parallels to rhetorical texture: how tone, style, and narrative stance concerning the bean-field diverge between the two works.

Tao Yuanming's rhetoric is characterized by brevity, understatement, and rhythmic austerity. Writing in the tightly controlled form of classical Chinese verse, Tao employs a poetics of simplicity in which silence and

omission are as communicative as the spoken word. What is left unsaid often carries more weight than explicit statement. In *Back to Country Life*, the description of the bean plot is sparse: Tao merely alludes to "bean seedlings [that] are sparse" amid the thick grass (Feng, 2016, p. 98), letting the natural image imply its own significance. This economy of language reflects a broader aesthetic of naturalness (自然而然) and non-action (無為) rooted in Chinese literary tradition. The few words devoted to beans are framed in balanced, compact lines that invite reflection rather than explication. The absence of elaborate metaphor or authorial commentary is itself a rhetorical strategy — a restraint that forces the reader to intuit the moral import. As Feng (2016) observes, Tao's style "submerges personal emotion in landscape, allowing moral vision to arise from quiet presence rather than argument" (p. 98). In other words, Tao incorporates meaning by indirection: the ethical resonance of the bean is generated through omission, allusion, and rhythm rather than through explicit exposition. The poem's gentle cadence (e. g. the parallel couplet "I rise at dawn to clear the weeds, / Carrying my hoe home by moonlight") mimics the cyclical motion of farm work and imparts a contemplative mood. Each poetic line becomes a unit of meditation — concise, measured, and open-ended — distilling physical labor into metaphysical insight. Tao's rhetorical stance is one of achieved renunciation: he writes from the calm assurance of someone who has already embraced a life of retreat. The tone remains consistently tranquil and stoic, conveying an introspective certainty. In sum, Tao's rhetorical method is to show without telling — to present the bean-field with such understated clarity that its symbolic significance (ethical solitude, resilience, purity) emerges naturally within the reader's mind. This approach exemplifies a classical ideal of writing as "soundless poetry," aligning form and content in a seamless expression of virtue through simplicity.

Thoreau's rhetoric, by contrast, is expansive, layered, and overtly self-reflexive. Writing in the flexible form of a personal essay, Thoreau turns the act of bean cultivation into a discursive arena where observation, introspection, and polemic intertwine. His language is probing and often interrogative — he famously begins the chapter by asking, "What shall I learn of beans or beans of me?" (Thoreau, 1964, p. 129). This rhetorical question immediately establishes an exploratory tone: rather than presenting a settled meaning, Thoreau's text enacts a search for meaning. Unlike Tao, who treats his agrarian retreat as self-evidently virtuous, Thoreau uses the bean-field as a philosophical stage upon which he performs doubt, irony, and insight in real time. Throughout "The Bean-Field," Thoreau alternates between literal description and abstract musing, creating a dynamic interplay of levels of meaning. He meticulously records facts — the length of his rows (seven miles of beans), the enemies of his crop (weeds, worms, woodchucks), the tally of bushels harvested — yet he continually digresses into reflection, questioning purpose and value. For instance, after noting the beans attached him to the earth "like Antaeus," he pointedly asks, "But why should I raise them? Only Heaven knows", and muses that his farming was a "curious labor" undertaken as much for spiritual growth as for food. This oscillation between practicality and philosophy is a hallmark of Thoreau's transcendentalist style, where knowledge arises through subjective immersion and frequent self-questioning rather than through received wisdom. As Chen (2021) notes, Thoreau's prose embraces provisionality: it delights in the process of thought rather than in delivering moral certitudes. Accordingly, his tone is restless, dialogic, and experimental — at different points reverent, sardonic, rhapsodic, or skeptical. Thoreau writes in the midst of an experiment, not from the conclusion of one, so his rhetoric conveys a sense of ongoing discovery. In effect, Thoreau's narrative voice creates meaning inductively: by piling up observations, analogies (mythic and domestic alike), and rhetorical

questions, he lets the symbolic significance of the beans accrete gradually. As the chapter progresses, beans evolve from mere vegetables to touchstones of classical myth (Antaeus), objects of market calculation (his profit of $8.71), and finally metaphors for higher values (the "seeds" of virtue he vows to sow). This cumulative, digressive approach contrasts sharply with Tao's terse lyric condensation of meaning. Thoreau's essay form permits recursion and elaboration, yielding a richly layered symbolism that is absent from Tao's spare poem. In short, Thoreau's rhetorical mode is to tell while showing — to actively interpret and interrogate the bean-field within the text, thereby inviting the reader into the intellectual labor of finding significance. This open, often questioning style exemplifies what comparative scholars identify as the affective-expressive bent of Western Romantic and transcendental writing (Miner, 1990), in contrast to the suggestive reserve of classical Chinese poetics.

The textual form of each work further shapes these rhetorical differences. Tao's concise five-character lines enforce a high degree of compression; meaning emerges in flashes of imagery and juxtaposition. The poetic form encourages allusive simplicity — every word is weighted, and the silence between lines speaks volumes. By necessity, Tao's symbolism is implicit and highly concentrated. Thoreau's prose chapter, on the other hand, is structurally open-ended. The essay form allows him to incorporate narrative, analysis, and anecdote in a single flow. He digresses into topics like local farming practices, classical literature (quoting Evelyn and Roman writers), and personal memory, all within the bean-field chapter. This breadth of content means that beans become a cumulative metaphor: they gather meaning through extended description and context, rather than standing as a single crystallized image. Indeed, Thoreau's chapter reads as part farming journal, part sermonic allegory, and part social critique — a generic hybrid that classical Chinese poetry (with its strict formal bounds) would not accommodate. Thus, form and rhetoric coincide: Tao's verse delivers a distilled emblem, whereas Thoreau's essay develops a panoramic tableau of meanings around the bean. Comparative poetics underscores that each genre carries its own rhetorical possibilities (Miner, 1990); here the difference between a brief nature lyric and a verbose prose meditation is central to how the bean is portrayed and interpreted.

The authors' tones likewise diverge, reflecting their different stances and temporal perspectives. Tao's tone is consistently calm, earnest, and resolute. Having already made his life choice to retreat, he speaks from a place of fulfilled conviction. There is little overt doubt or inner conflict in his poem — the righteousness of his rural simplicity is assumed, not argued. The reader encounters a voice of sage-like assurance, in line with the Chinese recluse tradition, where the act of withdrawal itself confers moral authority. In contrast, Thoreau's tone in "The Bean-Field" is exploratory and at times unsettled. He is testing his ideals as he writes, fully aware that his experiment is an open question. Thoreau can be wryly humorous (calling himself "a Pythagorean" about beans), momentarily discouraged (as when he notes the futility of planting "the seeds of virtue" that did not sprout), yet ultimately optimistic (finding moral "profit" in the labor beyond the $8.71 earned). This tonal multiplicity — by turns ironic, earnest, and aspirational — reflects Thoreau's temporal stance of writing in medias res. He composes from within the ongoing process of living at Walden, whereas Tao writes in retrospect, looking back on his choice to farm as an accomplished fact. Consequently, Thoreau's bean-field is portrayed with dramatic tension (questions of purpose, battles with pests, uncertain outcomes), whereas Tao's bean plot is depicted with retrospective serenity (as a realized ideal of a hermit's life). The divergent tones underscore how each writer's rhetoric aligns with their philosophical approach: Tao's stoicism and subtlety versus Thoreau's

dynamism and self-inquiry.

Finally, and critically, the two authors construct different relationships between the bean-field and social or political authority, revealing how their rhetoric serves distinct ends. Tao's apolitical posture is itself a rhetorical choice — his poem makes no direct reference to the corruption or chaos of his era, yet this very silence is a form of quiet protest. By focusing exclusively on his beans and gardens, Tao withholds validation from the court and empire he has left, enacting a withdrawal that is ethically charged but rhetorically gentle. The bean-field in *Back to Country Life* represents an alternative moral universe where imperial titles and wealth are irrelevant; Tao's restrained tone and avoidance of overt polemic exemplify what symbolic anthropologists might call a "cultural performance of dissent" — protest by means of lifestyle and aesthetic distance rather than confrontation. Thoreau, however, engages in a far more explicit critique of his society even within the bucolic setting of the bean-field. His rhetoric directly tackles issues like economic values and property rights. For example, he mocks the profit motive by meticulously calculating his farming expenses and concluding with only a small profit — a satirical nod to the absurdity of measuring life by monetary gain. He also pointedly satirizes Americans' preoccupation with "busy about their beans" to the neglect of higher virtues. Moreover, Thoreau uses the bean-field episode to stage a kind of symbolic civil disobedience. In one revealing aside, he remarks that he exchanged his beans "for rice" and did not care for them "to eat" because he was "by nature a Pythagorean… as far as beans are concerned, whether they mean porridge or voting" (Thoreau, 1964, p. 130). Here Thoreau playfully equates beans with ballots, implying that his farming is as much a rejection of politics (electoral participation) as it is of commerce — a bold assertion of individual principle over collective norms. Additionally, when woodchucks and weeds encroach on his plot, Thoreau pointedly questions his moral right to claim the land ("what right had I to oust" the wild plants, ibid.), revealing a stance of ecological egalitarianism that subverts human authority over nature. Such moments render the bean-field a microcosm of Thoreau's resistance to social and governmental expectations. Indeed, the values Thoreau practices among the bean rows — simplicity over wealth, principle over conformity, personal conscience over law (recall that during his Walden years he was jailed for refusing to pay a poll tax) — parallel the ethos of his later essay Civil Disobedience, though *Walden* conveys them through metaphor rather than manifesto. In the bean-field, Thoreau enacts a form of lived protest: by literally "voting" with his hoe for a different way of life, he transforms agricultural labor into a statement of autonomy and reform. His rhetoric in this context is confrontational in a subtle way — couched in pastoral narrative yet cutting in its challenge to capitalism and government. As a result, Thoreau's bean-field embodies what one critic calls a "microcosm of civil disobedience" (Chen, 2021, p. 134), a space where cultivating one's own values necessarily defies the status quo. Tao's bean plot, conversely, is more a microcosm of detachment — a space of inner purity that stands apart from the worldly realm rather than openly opposing it.

To encapsulate, while the symbolic import of beans as a medium of simplicity and integrity is shared by Tao Yuanming and Henry Thoreau, their rhetorical executions diverge profoundly. Tao's minimalist, allusive, and serene style reflects an indigenous Chinese poetics of withdrawal — conveying meaning through suggestion, balance, and the unsaid. Thoreau's rich, interrogative, and often iconoclastic style reflects a Transcendentalist poetics — constructing meaning through analytical depth, personal engagement, and open challenge to the reader. These divergent rhetorics are a reminder that even a common natural symbol is refracted through the prism of culture and genre. The bean-field, as a literary image, is molded by the tools of language: Tao's tightly

structured quatrains yield a timeless epiphany of agrarian virtue, whereas Thoreau's sprawling prose yields a dynamic debate about human purpose. This comparison thus underscores the necessity of a cross-cultural methodology that balances shared themes with stylistic particularity. By attending to both the universal and the particular — the symbolic affinities and the formal differences — we gain a richer understanding of how Tao and Thoreau each turn the planting of beans into a profound statement on life, each in his own idiom. This approach accords with modern comparative frameworks (Miner, 1990; Beller & Leerssen, 2007) that encourage us to see literature as a dialogue between distinct traditions, where similar motifs are realized through different narrative arts. Ultimately, appreciating these divergent rhetorics enhances our insight into the texts' deeper cultural meanings, revealing how a single natural image can be orchestrated into different aesthetic experiences — one a meditative poem of resignation, the other an exploratory essay of rebellion — yet both achieving a resonant critique of civilization through the evocative figure of the bean.

4. Conclusion

This study has explored the symbolic significance of beans in Tao Yuanming's pastoral poetry *Back to Country Life* and Thoreau's The Bean-Field chapter from *Walden*, uncovering both convergences and divergences in their representation of self-sufficiency, ecological intimacy, and personal withdrawal from society. Both authors transform the bean from an agricultural detail into a moral emblem, but they reach this end by different rhetorical routes—Tao through poetic minimalism and moral certainty, Thoreau through essayistic elaboration and philosophical inquiry. The shared symbolism highlights a transhistorical resonance between two thinkers who, despite their spatial and cultural distance, envision agricultural labor as a form of spiritual cultivation and ethical resistance.

This research contributes to comparative literary studies by shifting attention from generalized themes such as "reclusion" or "pastoral life" toward a focused analysis of one concrete symbolic image. Unlike prior scholarship that emphasizes overarching natural philosophies (e. g., Zhang, 2017; Zhao, 2024), this study foregrounds the rhetorical and narrative mechanics through which symbolism operates at the level of language, form, and voice. By centering beans—a humble, even overlooked figure in symbolic criticism—this paper establishes a cross-cultural channel of meaning-making grounded not in abstract ideology but in the tactile, embodied experiences of labor and land. This approach opens new possibilities for examining how the symbolic richness of everyday life transcends national and generic boundaries.

The findings invite broader reflection on how literary texts use the quotidian to frame alternative ethical systems. Both Tao and Thoreau reimagine agriculture as a philosophical experiment, wherein meaning arises not through productivity but through lived engagement with the material world. This reading reinforces the importance of rhetorical texture in symbolic analysis and suggests that future comparative work would benefit from attending not only to thematic parallels but to how symbolism is narratively constructed and tonally shaped. In doing so, we also expand the discourse on ecocriticism and transcendentalism beyond dominant Western paradigms, embedding it in a global literary conversation.

Admittedly, this study focuses on only two canonical texts and a single symbolic motif, which limits its scope. Further research might expand the corpus to include additional agrarian or ecological figures in East-West

literature, or examine how food-related imagery operates in non-literary genres such as political writing, memoir, or religious texts. Another promising direction would be to analyze reader reception across cultures to determine how symbolic figures like beans are interpreted differently in various linguistic and philosophical traditions. Nonetheless, by grounding analysis in concrete rhetorical practice, this study lays a foundation for future inquiry into the shared symbolic vocabularies that link human beings across time, place, and ideology.

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