

# Environmental Ethics in Emerson's Works: An Analysis of His Views of Transcendentalist Nature, Literature and Art, Lifestyle, and Education

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**Abstract:** This study examines the environmental-ethical dimensions in Ralph Waldo Emerson's selected works through textual analysis of his transcendental view of nature, literary and artistic outlook integrating nature and the "oversoul", view of a nature-returning lifestyle, and Emerson's educational perspective of the pursuit of divinity and self-perfection. By interpreting these themes through an environmental ethics lens, the paper uncovers the underlying ecological values embedded within Emerson's literary and philosophical project. The analysis demonstrates that his transcendental conception of nature. A his literary perspective, his call for a return to natural living, and his vision of self-cultivation collectively express a profound environmental ethos. This inquiry holds significant theoretical and practical implications for the research and development of Emerson's environmental ethics, ethical literary criticism and the ecocritical study of American nature writing, and the advancement of global ecological civilization.

**Keywords:** Environmental ethics; Transcendentalism; Nature; Oversoul; Returning to nature; Individual perfection

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**Online publication:** September 26, 2025

## 1. Background

The mid-19th century marked a significant intellectual shift in the United States. A number of thinkers was influenced by European Romanticism and Darwinian evolutionary theory and began to critique the industrialized world's relationship with nature. Figures such as Edwards, Emerson, Thoreau, and Leopold emerged as pioneers in what would later be formalized as Western environmental ethics <sup>[1]</sup>. As a nation where environmental ethics has matured, the United States represents a central locus for its highest levels of theoretical development. The formation of this field is rooted in deep reflection on the causes of the environmental crisis, as well as in the retrieval of spiritual and intellectual resources advocating for human-nature harmony.

Following World War II, accelerated industrialization and global expansion intensified the inherent contradictions of industrial civilization. By the 1960s and 1970s, the environmental protection movement, joining anti-war, feminist,

and civil rights movements had challenged mainstream Western ideologies. In this context, philosophers began to fundamentally rethink cultural paradigms and humanity's dependence on the natural environment. Against a backdrop of growing ecological disruption, environmental ethics developed vigorously as a theoretical framework to summarize and reflect upon these widespread social movements. As an early industrialized nation, the United States confronted ecological issues sooner than many others and was in a situation further shaped by its unique history and culture of colonial expansion. This prompted increasing public attention to environmental problems and spurred the emergence of diverse strands of environmental thought.

Literary writers have played a vital role in this discourse by using their understanding of nature to express ecological sentiment, critique societal attitudes, and explore the cultural roots of environmental issues. They help cultivate sound environmental values and offer aesthetic engagement through literature reading. The works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) as a preeminent American philosopher, poet, essayist, and leader of the New England Transcendentalist movement are particularly rich in environmental, ecological, and literary themes. His writings reflect profound meditations on the self, life, and nature, inviting careful examination of how literature shapes human behavior and attitudes toward the natural world<sup>[2]</sup>.

From an ethical perspective, critiquing, studying, and interpreting literature, thereby exploring the ethical thoughts of authors, deciphering the ethical connotations within literary works, and revealing the social contexts in which ethical phenomena in these works emerge, provides multiple possibilities for literary interpretation. The ethical turn in literary studies has already offered a referential framework for reflecting on and addressing modern spiritual dilemmas and value crises. The ethical function of literature can effectively foster societal recognition of beauty, goodness, and conscience, strengthen the bonds between individuals and society, and promote the establishment of a well-ordered society. Emerson's ethical thought is profoundly rich. However, due to a long-standing lack of in-depth scholarly exploration, this paper aims to systematically examine his transcendentalist ideas from the perspectives of nature, literature and art, lifestyle, and education, thereby underscoring its significant implications. Emerson's transcendentalist philosophy is deeply grounded in his view of nature, from which his early environmental ethical thinking naturally emerges. This makes him an essential figure in the historical study of environmental ethics, not only a master of American letters and philosophy, but also a key representative of the incipient stage of Anglo-American environmental thought.

This paper, first identifies and describes Emerson's transcendental view of nature from the perspective of environmental ethics. Second, it examines his literary outlook, particularly the concept of the "Oversoul" in relation to nature. Third, it analyzes his advocacy of a lifestyle returning to nature. Fourth, it explores his educational ideals centered on individual perfection. These facets together offer a critical response to the social crises of his time and embody the budding form of modern environmental ethics. This study synthesizes the environmental ethical insights in Emerson's works, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of his transcendental doctrine and ethical core. By revisiting Emerson's writings and analyzing his ecological vision, this research holds significant theoretical and practical value, not only enriching the discourse on American nature writing but also informing the ongoing global pursuit of ecological civilization.

## 2. Literature review

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), a preeminent philosopher, poet, essayist, and the leading voice of the 19th-century American Transcendentalist movement, holds a seminal position in American intellectual history. Hailed by President Abraham Lincoln as "the prophet of American consciousness" and "the Confucius of the United States", his influence was such that literary critic Irving Howe deemed him the "dominant spirit of the age"<sup>[3]</sup>. Matthew Arnold further certified Emerson's significance, declaring his prose the most important work done in prose in the nineteenth century *Nature*<sup>[4]</sup>. Emerson's prolific output, including foundational texts like *Nature* (1836), *Essays: First and Second Series* (1841, 1844), and *The Conduct of Life* (1860) has profoundly shaped American culture, philosophy, and literary tradition. His seminal

essay *Nature* (1836), in particular established the core principles of Transcendentalism, a philosophy that has invited continuous scholarly reinterpretation<sup>[5]</sup>.

Western scholarship on Emerson is vast and multifaceted. In recent decades, a significant trend that re-examines his work has emerged through ecological and environmental lenses. As global environmental crises have intensified, scholars have increasingly turned to Emerson to unearth ecological wisdom relevant to the contemporary age, often casting him as a pioneering environmental thinker. In the context of environmental and ecological crises, numerous scholars of the 19th-century American Renaissance period have engaged in literary interpretations and ecological readings of the transcendentalist view of nature and nature writing by the American philosopher and naturalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson. In the early 21st century, representative works in this regard include *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* written by American ecocritic and Harvard University professor Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing* focused substantially on Thoreau, crucially situated Emerson within the genealogy of American environmental writing and its cultural formation<sup>[6]</sup>. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* further contextualized Emerson within the evolving field of ecocriticism. He pointed out that ecocriticism was the study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in the spirit of commitment to the practical environmental movement, elucidating the connections between literature and the environment, as well as between nature and American literature and culture, from the perspective of ecocriticism<sup>[7]</sup>. Emerson and Thoreau as American Prophets of Eco-wisdom positioned Emerson among the “American prophets of eco-wisdom”, emphasizing his philosophy of connection with nature<sup>[8]</sup>. A passionate thinker intellectual biography provided a nuanced account of the development of Emerson’s ideas on nature, religion, and philosophy, underscoring his role in forging an independent American cultural identity<sup>[9]</sup>.

In contrast, dedicated Emerson studies in the Chinese academic context are less extensive, though they have made notable progress. Key works often explore the intersections between Emerson’s thought and Eastern philosophy. *Emerson and China* offered a systematic analysis of Emerson’s individualism through a comparative cultural lens, while study conducted by Xie Zhichao has focused study on Emerson’s reception of Confucianism<sup>[10,11]</sup>. Other scholars have traced Emerson’s profound impact on American literature and culture<sup>[12,13]</sup>. His individualism was identified as a cornerstone of the American national spirit<sup>[14,15]</sup>. The philosophical and metaphysical underpinnings of his transcendentalism have also been a subject of inquiry<sup>[16,17]</sup>. Importantly for the present study, a growing number of scholars have begun to articulate the ecological dimensions of Emerson’s worldview. *Emerson’s View of Nature as Unity of God and Man and His Aesthetics* interpreted Emerson’s view of nature explicitly and highlighted its dialectical significance and ecological implications<sup>[18]</sup>. Regarding the relationship between nature writing, environment, and ecocriticism, *The Environmental Ethics of Literature: The Significance of ecocriticism* posits that literary environmental ethics serves not only as a primary objective pursued by ecocriticism, a highly active field within contemporary Western literary criticism, but also as a significant platform enabling Chinese ecological literary critics to engage with the international academic community. Ecocritics consistently adopt the natural ecological environment as their conceptual framework and seek to awaken ecological consciousness through the power of literature<sup>[19]</sup>. Furthermore, Ecocriticism and Ecologism elucidates that ecocriticism is a form of literary criticism that examines the relationship between literature and nature under the guidance of ecological holism. It aims to expose the ideological and cultural roots of the ecological crisis as reflected in literary works, while also exploring the ecological aesthetic and artistic expression within literature<sup>[20]</sup>. This provides us with a more profound and clearer understanding of ecocriticism’s research objectives and content.

Despite Emerson’s Transcendentalism and his general view of nature have been extensively researched, there is a scarcity of studies that provide a systematic and detailed examination of his thought through the specific, structured lens of environmental ethics. Existing scholarship, both in the West and in China, has often touched upon his ecological concerns but has seldom undertaken a comprehensive analysis that frames his ideas on nature, lifestyle, art, and education as a coherent body of nascent environmental ethical theory. This paper aims to move beyond the established focus on his transcendental

philosophy and cultural influence to construct a systematic account of Emerson's environmental ethics. By reinterpreting his representative works, this study will demonstrate how his vision of nature, his call for a return to a natural lifestyle, his integrative literary outlook, and his ideal of individual perfection collectively form a meaningful, albeit early, contribution to environmental ethical thought. In doing so, this study not only enriches our understanding of Emerson but also responds to the modern ecological crisis by exploring the resources his philosophy may offer for addressing contemporary anxieties and fostering a more sustainable relationship with the natural world.

### **3. An analysis of environmental ethics in Emerson's works**

The environmental ethics inherent in Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings emerge from the rich socio-cultural context of 19th-century Europe and America. Influences include his critique of monotheistic theological traditions, his engagement with Romantic literature, his reception of German idealist philosophy, and his creative adaptation of Eastern thought, particularly Confucianism. These intellectual currents, combined with Emerson's personal experiences, profoundly shaped his ecological vision. Traces of environmental ethics are articulated across his works through several interconnected frameworks: a transcendental view of nature, a literary and artistic outlook informed by nature and the "Oversoul", an advocacy of returning to nature as a mode of living, and an educational ideal oriented toward individual perfection through spiritual and natural harmony.

#### **3.1. Transcendental view of nature**

Transcendentalism represented a major intellectual movement in 19th-century America, significantly influencing the nation's ideological and cultural development. As both an important liberation movement in U.S. intellectual history and the beginning of American spiritual independence, transcendentalism also propelled American Romantic literature to its zenith, culminating in what has been termed the American Renaissance. The core of Emerson's transcendentalism lies in his view of nature, most comprehensively articulated in his first and most influential work, *Nature* (1836). Emerson posited that nature and the human mind were infused with spiritual presence. Material reality itself served as a symbol of spirit. The entirety of the natural world embodied the divine. He championed self-guided immersion into nature's vastness, where intuitive engagement could inspire insight, foster understanding, and ultimately lead to spiritual equilibrium and even a state of unity between humanity and the natural world<sup>[21]</sup>.

A closer examination of Emerson's transcendental view of nature reveals an early form of environmental ethics. A central theoretical concern of environmental ethics is whether nature possesses intrinsic value independent of human interests. Emerson's perspective implicitly affirms this through his nuanced classification of nature's functions. In *Nature*, he identifies a hierarchy of uses: commodity, beauty, language, and discipline. The most fundamental of these is nature's provision of material resources, which humans reshape through intellect to fulfill practical needs, thus exemplifying instrumental value<sup>[22]</sup>. Beyond material utility, however, nature fulfills a higher need through its aesthetic dimension. Beauty, in Emerson's thought, arises from the integration of natural forms with human perception, inspiring noble aspirations and stimulating the creative spirit. Importantly, Emerson integrates beauty with truth and goodness, framing it as a universal quality inherent in all things.

The highest function of nature is its disciplinary or spiritual role. When nature guides moral reflection and engages the human spirit in discerning virtue, it manifests its ultimate value. Emerson suggests that nature becomes spiritualized through human perception: If the soul is beautiful, nature is beautiful. If the soul is good, nature is good<sup>[22]</sup>. This spiritualization enables people to perceive the inherent harmony and moral order of the natural world. Thus, Emerson's nature is not a mere material entity separate from humanity, but reveals three layered dimensions of intrinsic value through its interaction with human consciousness. From this standpoint, we can reinterpret the human-nature relationship as one of interdependence within a shared community. Both humans and nature possess not only instrumental but also intrinsic value, expressed through their capacity to harmonize the whole. The intrinsic value of nature in Emerson's framework

underlies the possibility of ecological harmony and unity. It is a core tenet of his environmental ethics.

Moreover, Emerson articulates a vision of nature as a source of inspiration and moral instruction. He celebrates the boundless charm of natural beauty, emphasizes the symbolic and generative power of natural language, and affirms the governance of moral law within the natural order. These powers stem from a direct and intuitive engagement with nature, reflecting a deeper unity between humanity and the cosmos. Nature, in his view, is neither a mere accessory to human needs nor an inexhaustible resource reservoir. Rather, through the human spirit, nature achieves harmony with humanity. True self-knowledge arises only when nature and spirit function together. Emerson further contends that nature is pervaded by divine spirit of the “Oversoul”. It is through this pervasive spiritual presence that nature coheres and endures. By grasping the essence of natural law, individuals may attain identity with the divine spirit. In this way, humanity and nature achieve a state of perfect spiritual harmony and unity.

### **3.2. “Oversoul” and nature: The literary and artistic outlook**

Rooted in his transcendental view of nature, Emerson conceives of nature, God, and humanity as a continuously circulating and indivisible whole. Within this organic unity, God is expressed as the “Oversoul”, an infinite spiritual source to which the human soul aspires. Nature, in Emerson’s framework, functions as a symbolic medium through which the human spirit communicates with the “Oversoul”. When nature, the “Oversoul” and humanity achieve spiritual integration, they form a harmonious whole, revealing a world perfected by the unity of truth, goodness, and beauty<sup>[23]</sup>. The articulation of this ideal world through language gives rise to the highest forms of art and literature.

Since the expression of the soul profoundly influences the mind of the reader or beholder, it evokes resonance across souls. Thus, literature and art become vehicles of the “Oversoul”, serving to edify and purify the human spirit. Poets, in particular, act as conduits through which nature infused with the “Oversoul” enters human consciousness. They reveal their individuality and creativity through works that merge nature with the divine, thereby fulfilling a moral and spiritual function. In Emerson’s view, the “Oversoul” and nature are perennial themes of artistic expression, as well as carriers of art’s moral power<sup>[24]</sup>.

Emerson maintains that genuine literature and art which are born from the fusion of the “Oversoul” and nature serve a moral and enlightening role: they convey the author’s ethical sensibilities and inspire moral reflection in the audience. He urges artists and writers to draw directly from nature as the primary source of creation. By moving from the civilized world into natural surroundings, individuals may acquire physical and spiritual experiences that enable them to depict the union of nature and the “Oversoul”, thereby contributing to the soul’s elevation. This principle forms the theoretical foundation of American nature writing.

For Emerson, the value of literature and art resides in their capacity to mediate between human perception and nature, and to facilitate communion between the soul and the natural world. He believed that the beauty of nature had a universal appeal, and that the mission of art was to reveal this beauty, transforming nature into a palace of the spirit. His transcendentalism promotes nature as the medium through which the soul apprehends truth, emphasizing the alignment of spirit and nature, championing a return to natural living, and advocating for harmonious coexistence between humans and the environment<sup>[22]</sup>.

By opening their minds to nature, individuals may receive its inspiration that helped establish nature as a dominant theme in the literary culture of Emerson’s time. Inspired by his revolutionary vision of nature, writers such as Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman produced seminal works across prose, fiction, and poetry, shaping the course of American letters. Under Emerson’s intellectual guidance, the nineteenth-century American writers turned inward to seek sources of creativity and national identity in the natural world, thereby inaugurating a new era of American nature literature and laying the groundwork for its subsequent development.

### **3.3. The lifestyle view of returning to nature**

Emerson’s vision of lifestyle stems directly from his transcendental view of nature. He championed a mode of living

characterized by simplicity, frugality, diligent labor, and above all, a continual return to nature and companionship with the natural world. In such a life, one communes with nature in solitude, allowing it to become a source of thought and spiritual insight. Through intuitive and sensory engagement, he sought to become a transparent eyeball fully absorbed in nature and perceived it without the interference of ego or preconception. He advocated not only a physical return to nature but also its veneration as humanity's spiritual home.

Emerson's attitude toward the material aspects of lifestyle, particularly consumption, reveals a nuanced stance. In his early work, *Nature* (1836), he expressed admiration for technological progress and its capacity to transform production and daily life. He believed that technological advancement could spur social development and civilizational progress, linking it to human freedom and the capacity of the spirit to transcend material constraints and soar imaginatively<sup>[5]</sup>.

However, Emerson also insisted that progress in science and technology must be accompanied by moral and spiritual growth. As the 19th century unfolded, he grew troubled by the disjunction between technological prosperity and inner development. He observed how industrial and commercial forces encroached upon society, nature, and the very possibility of spiritual transcendence. In an era marked by social ills and a culture obsessed with wealth and display, Emerson lamented that civilized man had built a coach, but had lost the use of his feet. He was supported on crutches, but lacked so much support from muscle. Such barriers, he warned, alienated people from themselves, each other, and the natural world.

In response, Emerson sought to provide intellectual and moral tools to counter these trends. He openly criticized American society's devotion to materialism, emphasizing instead the power of spirit and a divinity that surpasses material reality. He called for a higher philosophy to guide contemporary values and behaviors. While appreciating the benefits of technology, Emerson recognized its potential to erode individual wholeness and foster alienation in a rapidly modernizing society. He therefore urged his contemporaries to turn to nature and embrace a life of deliberate simplicity<sup>[25]</sup>. Personally, embodying this ideal, he planted orchards in Concord and acquired woodland by the lake to build a secluded cabin for reflection and writing. Emerson's advocacy of a simple, nature-oriented life offers a meaningful reference point for the consumption ethics of modern environmentalism, presenting an early critique of ecological and spiritual alienation while proposing a mode of living grounded in reverence, return, and inner freedom.

### **3.4. Emerson's educational perspective: The pursuit of divinity and self-perfection**

Emerson's educational philosophy arises from his acute diagnosis of the social and spiritual alienation afflicting 19th-century American society. He observed how industrialization and materialism fragmented the human spirit, and in response, he formulated a distinctive vision of education oriented toward individual perfection through reintegration with nature and moral law. Central to this vision is what Emerson termed the "moral sentiment", an innate faculty that allows the human soul to perceive and resonate with the ethical order inherent in nature. He believed that when the soul opens itself to this sentiment, a more secret, sweet, and overpowering beauty that bridges the human spirit and the natural world is revealed. For Emerson, moral law lies at the heart of nature; though transcendent, it permeates all natural phenomena. Nature thus serves not only as a source of aesthetic inspiration but also as a moral instructor and legislator.

Only through nature's discipline, Emerson argued, can individuals truly come to know themselves and establish a meaningful connection between mind and cosmos. The symbolic significance of nature lies especially in its capacity to offer moral admonition. As the American spiritual condition declined in his time, Emerson's interpretation of nature's moral role evolved beyond physical landscapes to emphasize the inherent divinity of the individual. He no longer located divine revelation solely in religious texts or empirical science but turned instead to the human soul itself. It is the ultimate resource for overcoming the crises of the age. Emerson's educational response was to appeal to this inner divinity. He insisted that every person possesses not only desires and instincts but also moral and rational faculties. Education, in his view, should aim to awaken and elevate this divine nature, allowing the human spirit to travel the circuit of the universe. Individuals are infused with a sense of the sacred, enabling self-transcendence and the realization of their full humanity through nature.

Emerson further posited the existence of a "whole soul", a universal beauty and unity present in each person. By

cultivating intelligence and intuition, one may perceive the infinite spirit behind sun, moon, animals, and trees. When the soul merges with human intellect, it gives rise to what Emerson called “genius”, his ideal personality, a representative figure capable of resisting the alienating effects of specialized labor and social fragmentation [23]. Such representative individuals, whether scholars or poets, embody the continuous process of self-perfection through the union of nature and soul. The ultimate aim of Emersonian education is that only scholars and poets can reintegrate a society spiritually and ethically.

Emerson’s educational thought holds significant implications for contemporary environmental ethics education. His early critique of alienation sheds light on the root causes of the human-nature rift still relevant today. His emphasis on truth, goodness, and beauty as educational ideals offers a value framework for ecological pedagogy. Moreover, his commitment to moral practice and participatory engagement provides inspiration for developing a more conscious and active environmental ethic. Finally, his vision of pursuing the highest moral harmony between humanity and nature illuminates the ultimate goal of environmental education: not merely knowledge, but ethical transformation.

In summary, Emerson’s educational view affirmed the intrinsic value of nature, emphasized spiritual harmony between humans and the natural world, and promoted a return to nature as the spiritual home of humanity. By integrating the individual soul with nature, he sought the perfection of the self and the ultimate unity of truth, goodness, and beauty, all reflecting a profound and early articulation of environmental ethics.

#### **4. Implications and significance of Emerson’s environmental ethics**

An ethical examination of Emerson’s perspectives on nature, literature and arts, lifestyle, and education, and analysis of the significance of his philosophy for American society in his era can provide the help of exploring its potential relevance to addressing the most profound dilemmas confronting contemporary civilization. The nineteenth-century United States witnessed concurrent ecological and existential crises that prompted Emerson to reconceptualize the relationship between humanity and nature. He maintained that the maladies and sufferings pervading human society stemmed fundamentally from the destruction of and alienation from the natural world. In response, Emerson critically engaged with both tradition and contemporary realities, challenged established authorities, and advocated for nature as a means to elevate the human spirit, rectify social pathologies, and address the most pressing concerns of his era, ultimately aspiring toward human moral fulfillment. Emerson advocated for a return to nature as a pathway to transcend falsehood, evil, and ugliness while cultivating a spiritual homeland grounded in truth, goodness, and beauty. By extending moral consideration to the natural world, he emphasized its intrinsic ethical and aesthetic dimensions, thereby establishing a more profound unity between humanity and nature. In articulating both the instrumental and spiritual values of nature, Emerson inspired reverence, celebration, and ultimately, a harmonious coexistence between humans and their environment.

From the perspective of ethics of a discipline that emphasizes human value and morality, incorporating the natural environment into the scope of moral relations, exploring the moral relations, principles, standards, and behavioral norms between humans and the natural environment, and seeking new values suitable for the future relationship between humans and nature constitute the theoretical foundation for studying the issue of human sustainable development.

As a 19th-century thinker, Emerson employed nature as a medium to awaken ecological consciousness among American writers and to guide an emerging nation toward self-recognition and spiritual independence. The ecological significance embedded in his vision of nature remains deeply relevant, fostering the environmental ethics grounded in harmony and ecological aesthetic that affirms the organic wholeness of humanity and nature. Through literary expression, Emerson’s natural writings rouse ecological awareness, encourage reconciliation between human society and the natural world, and contribute to the balanced development of ecosystems. His work thus offers vital inspiration for the ongoing construction of an ecological civilization. Studying the environmental ethics in Emerson’s view of nature enables a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of how to coexist sustainably with the natural world. On the path toward ecological modernization, Emerson’s environmental thought serves as a reflective mirror, helping to identify and correct

ecologically harmful behaviors in a timely manner. Literature, as a reflection of real life, often embodies moral concepts and ideals drawn from lived ethical phenomena and behaviors. An examination of Emerson's works reveals that he provided a novel framework for understanding nature and can rightly be considered a foundational voice in American environmental ethics that continues to offer profound insights for contemporary society.

Through his writings, Emerson enabled Americans to appreciate natural beauty and recognize long-standing environmental challenges, raising public awareness of the urgency of the ecological crisis. Many readers of his works have been moved to become environmental advocates or conservationists. His reflections on the human-nature relationship remain especially pertinent in the current era of global ecological disruption. Emerson's transcendentalism holds a timeless significance that transcends both temporal and geographical boundaries. For China today, exploring and interpreting the ethical dimensions of his thought offers profound insights for the formulation and realization of the "Chinese Dream", and for providing a scientifically-grounded definition of its connotations <sup>[26]</sup>. In China, rapid economic growth since the 1980s has led to increasingly severe environmental problems. However, the development of national ecological consciousness has not kept pace, and ecological concerns are often sidelined by competing interests and desires. Ethics, with its broad permeation into daily life, can serve as a vital vehicle for transforming environmental theory into practice. We must employ diverse media and channels to foster public environmental awareness and civic engagement, encouraging voluntary participation in environmental stewardship and building a distinctly Chinese approach to environmental ethics. This is essential to achieving the ultimate goal of sustainable socioeconomic development.

As key institutions shaping social morality, universities should integrate ecological literacy throughout the process of cultural and quality education. This is an essential requirement for implementing the scientific outlook on development and constructing a harmoniously society. Efforts should include promoting the contemporary dissemination of traditional ecological culture and creating a strong campus eco-cultural atmosphere. Advancing curriculum development centered on ecological civilization education, supported by multimedia resources such as film and visual arts. Strengthening teaching, research, and practical initiatives aimed at cultivating ecological literacy. In summary, to achieve sustainable development, cultivate ecologically literate citizens, and build an ecological society, higher education must further integrate the sciences and humanities, embed ecological literacy throughout cultural education, and blend ecological culture with campus life. By constructing a green, scientific, and culturally conscious model of higher education, universities can nurture college students to become not only knowledgeable and rational but also ecologically minded persons capable of leading the transition toward a sustainable future.

Literary classics are naturally formed in the process of the development of human civilization. They embody humanity's historical understanding and interpretation of nature and society, and provide reference for contemporary social and individual life. Therefore, literary classics serve as indispensable spiritual sustenance in our lives and are essential reading. These classics not only require our engagement but also demand continuous interpretation to comprehend and appreciate them, thereby uncovering new dimensions of value and ensuring their enduring status as classics. The value of literary classics lies fundamentally in their ethical significance, while their artistic and aesthetic qualities function as the form or means through which this ethical value is realized. Consequently, the canonicity of a literary work is determined by its ethical value. Adopting an ethical literary criticism approach, aligned with the ethical nature of literature, to read, interpret, and evaluate classical literature can lead to the discovery of new insights. A classic itself constitutes a complete living structure, whose unique cultural connotations and spiritual vitality are inherently tied to the original text. The classic literary and philosophical works of Emerson thus provide an excellent entry point for reading English classics and serve as a significant means to guide students into the reading of English literary classics. Cultivating students' ability to read classics and enhancing their critical thinking skills are indispensable responsibilities for every English educator.

## 5. Conclusion

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the eminent American thinker, literary figure, and social activist, powerfully articulated his

transcendentalist philosophy through impassioned oratory and literary-philosophical works. His ideas profoundly resonated with contemporary American and European audiences, significantly influencing intellectual discourse while establishing a substantial popular foundation for the dissemination of Transcendentalism throughout the United States and Europe.

In confronting contemporary existential and environmental crises, reliance solely on compulsory legislation has proven fundamentally limited in effectively shaping human consciousness and behavioral patterns. Consequently, examining Emerson's philosophy through an ethical lens becomes imperative, as it offers pathways to transform human conduct and cultural paradigms through moral and spiritual cultivation. This approach ultimately facilitates individual moral refinement, spiritual enrichment, and the enhancement of societal values.

During Emerson's own era, such crises were already emerging. His transcendentalist perspective on nature, his literary and artistic view integrating the "Over-Soul" with nature, his advocacy for a nature-oriented lifestyle, and his educational philosophy emphasizing self-cultivation collectively constituted a remedy for these social maladies. These ideas, in essence, germinated the seeds of modern environmental ethics. Systematically examining, interpreting, and further exploring Emerson's ethical thought and contemporary spiritual significance holds substantial relevance for advancing current research in environmental ethics, propelling practical environmental movements, reconstructing consumption and educational ethics, informing ethical and ecocritical approaches to literary studies as well as contributing to the global pursuit of sustainability and ecological civilization.

## Funding

General Project of the 2019 Liaoning Provincial Social Science Planning Fund: "A Study of Emerson's Ethical Thought and Its Contemporary Spiritual Value" (Project No.: L19BWW010)

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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