



## *Nature as a Character: An Ecohumanist Study of Richard Power's The Overstory*

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### Abstract

This research paper aims to analyze Richard Powers' Pulitzer Prize-winning novel titled *The Overstory*, published in 2018, by considering it through the lens of ecohumanism. This text investigates how Powers subverts anthropocentric epistemology through engagement with storytelling and emerges with an innovative solution to environmental issues. This paper relies on textual readings and the principles of ecocriticism, assessing how Powers dismantles the anthropocentric human-nature opposition, challenges the framework of time frameworks beyond human control, and sketches the framework for a new environmental ethic. The study shows how tonal and epistemological variations in *The Overstory* make it a literary work and a form of ecocritical activism that may change how readers approach the more-than-human world and embrace non-anthropocentric modes of interacting with it.

**Keywords:** Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, eco-humanism, ecocriticism, posthumanism, arboreal literature, environmental ethics



## Introduction

The *Overstory* by Richard Powers, published in 2018, is a meaningful contribution to contemporary American literature to address the issue of environment and ecological disaster. The novel consists of nine human characters and their connection with trees; it decentralises anthropocentrism by ascribing more power to trees than people due to its post-humanist narrative style. Indeed, as Powers said in an interview with *The Guardian*, they wanted to take seriously the proposition that a nonhuman consciousness with a different time perspective could be as important, meaningful, engaging, and complex as a human tale (Adams, 2018). This relocation of the animal Other engulfs the humanist response to the environment in a 'green anti-humanism,' which constellates the frameworks of character, agency and plot.

It appears when environmental issues precipitate due to global climate change, species loss, and habitat destruction. Published in the same decade as pivotal scientific research on plant communication networks (Simard et al., 2012; Wohlleben, 2016), *The Overstory* embodies a kind of speculative fabulation that applies (Haraway, 2016) terms, crafting compelling stories that embody both neuroscientific fact and fiction with the potential to engender new forms of responsibility. Powers demonstrates how literature can elicit emotions, how readers can care about something so inanimate and marvel at the idea of trees.

## Research Problem

Even contemporary criticism of Powers' novel has mainly focused on its experimental aspects or scientific realism. At the same time, how *The Overstory* overturns readers' expectations of how human characters interact with the natural environment with the help of a narrative has received less attention. Through the novel, Powers portrays trees as beings with agency, thereby countering stable philosophical beliefs in the West that portray nature as an inactive entity to be exploited during the ongoing story of the planet Earth. This paper fills this gap by arguing that Powers' eco-humanist approach does away with these binaries and presents a different way of envisioning human-tree interaction.

## Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How does Powers employ narrative strategies to elevate trees from background settings to active characters with agency in *The Overstory*?
2. In what ways does the novel's structure—particularly its temporal framing—challenge anthropocentric conceptions of time and history?
3. How does Powers integrate scientific knowledge about tree communication and forest ecosystems into his fictional narrative to create an eco-humanist perspective?
4. What ethical vision does *The Overstory* propose regarding human-nature relationships, and how does this vision relate to contemporary environmental discourse?

## Significance of the Study

It minds the academic literature in environmental humanities by presenting a nuanced and elaborate case of how Kalamis's literary fiction encodes scientific knowledge while developing the audience's emotional and ethical relationship with nonhuman things. As climate change and ecological degradation continue to gain momentum, it is vital to explore how literature can act as an intermediary between facts and emotions. In analyzing the novel *The Overstory*, one can see an example of what Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2014) call "materialist ecocriticism", meaning aim at the materiality of



narratives. Recommendations for how literature might undertake such refocusing will be further understood by reading how Powers manages this narrative recentering.

Moreover, since ecocriticism has recently been criticized for retelling apocalyptic stories of environmental decay, this research responds to such indicators to develop an improved one. According to Greg Garrard (2020), climate fiction is ambivalent between apocalypse and utopia without proposing practical solutions for living in nonhuman worlds. Thus, analysing Powers' novel as a work of literature, this study outlines how literature could help envision symbiotic futures, which is how environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2019) described a positive paradigm for human interactions with the natural environment.

### Literature Review

#### Ecohumanism and the Literary Imagination

As a concept, eco-humanism is a reaction to contemporary humanism and points to incorporating environmental concerns into humanist principles. Therefore, while deep ecology, at times, may promote a complete disregard for human-centrism, and traditional humanism may entail an indifferent approach to nonhuman beings, eco-humanism seeks the 'middle ground' that Kate Rigby (2004) spoke of as an ethical worldview that recognizes the place of humans as participants of the more-than-human world and their ability to assume ethical responsibility. This theoretical position provides a good angle from which to approach the considerations of *The Overstory* since it does not rely on the devaluation or overvaluation of human experiences as opposed to the other animals.

Over the past decade, a rapidly growing trend has existed towards incorporating eco-humanist views in literary scholarship. The criteria for an environmental text formulated by Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) posited an inclusion of the nonhuman environments as not just an element of place but also as part of the ethical equation of the text. In this vein, such analysts as Ursula Heise used Buell's theory to describe how literature mediates local and global environmental attitudes. At the same time, Stacy Alaimo introduced the notion of 'trans-corporeality' (2010), which means that people are deeply connected with nature, an idea that serves as the cornerstone of Powers' novel.

#### Trees in Literature and Cultural Imagination

In literature, trees have not just held these roles of metaphors, frameworks for events, and occasionally, speaking characters. Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests: From Ancient Greens to Contemporary Woods*, *The Shadow of Civilization* (2009) examines the European culture's double-folded approach towards woods as a pre-modern threat and a modern retreat for escape. More recently, Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy's *Green Modernism* (2015) continues where he discusses modernist literature's awareness of trees as temporal beings, the nature of which acts against the chronological temporality located at the heart of the moderate worldview.

More recent examples of tree-oriented narration are Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007), which tells the story of the main character's attempt to stop eating meat while embodying the image of a tree, and Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* (2016), which presents the reader with the history of deforestation and its consequences. However, *The Overstory* sets itself apart through what Heather Houser (2020) refers to as 'infographic imagination'—weaving information and concepts into stories. Matthew Taylor's analysis of the novel (2019)



is that Powers, in a way, takes the readers to the posthuman sublime in that he makes the readers deal with the concept of arboreal time and forest semiotics in Powers.

### **Narrative Agency and Non-Human Characters**

Posthuman agency has received much emphasis in the recent past from scholars in the area of material ecocritics and new materialist philosophers. Arguing against scientific conceptions of matter as dead and inert, Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Material* (2010) posits the concept of 'vital materiality,' the ability of non-human entities to act with their paths, inclinations, and possible intentions. Building on this idea, scholars in literary studies such as Serenella Iovino (2012) have employed this approach to examine the manner in which narratives construct what she refers to as 'material storied-ness' or how matter is involved in narrative construction.

Specifically regarding trees as narrative agents, Dalia Nassar and Margaret Barbour's "Rooted: Engin LimÇin "The Embodied Knowledge of Trees" (2017) article focuses on how contemporary fiction produces ways of knowing that are grounded in trees. They claim that in the most recent novels, trees are no longer depicted as metaphors but as entities capable of thinking and speaking. Similarly, Patricia Vieira's "Phytographia: In the paper titled "Literature as Plant Writing", published in 2015, it is stated that some texts try to give the reader a 'plant point of view' that replaces anthropocentrism with plant-life phronesis.

### **Richard Powers and Environmental Writing**

Before *The Overstory*, Powers had published four novels for which he confirmed himself as an author concerned with science and technology and its consequences. Some works, such as *The Echo Maker* (2006), focused on the brain and consciousness, while others, like *Gain* (1998), engaged the viewer with capitalist pollution. Literary critics have analyzed Powers' writing for a number of aspects, one of which James Hurt refers to as the 'encyclopedic impulse,' or the attempt to incorporate scientific information into storylines. *The Overstory* is the most complex novel of Powers that deals with environmental concerns in a much broader way, provoking scholars to seek more about the ecological vision of the author.

Recent works criticizing *The Overstory* include Alexa Weik von Mossner's analysis of the novel's "strategic empathy" as well as Heinrich's Heather Houser's (2020) exploration of how Powers translates scientific realities such as the "World Wide Web". However, much less has been said about how the novel reformulates one of the foundational concepts of the European novel – that of character – to embrace trees as not just semiotic signifiers but as meaningful and sentient actors who act and think in the novel. This is the rationale for the current analysis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Ecocritical Theory**

This analysis uses ecocritical theory in general and the materialist branch in particular, which focuses on the ability of the non-human environment to communicate. According to Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2014), material ecocriticism analyses how the materiality of a creative world – or 'narrative agency' materializes in the textual environment. This way, the interaction of Powers with trees is considered not only as symbols but as things that are able to perform what Jane Bennett (2010) defined as thing-power—entities' ability to "resist their reduction to pure objects and to produce signs of their liveliness or self-animation" (p. xvi).

The study also draws on Timothy Morton's theory of 'hyperobjects', published in 2013, which describes non-relational objects that stretch from one temporal and spatial location



to another. Morton's framework is thus helpful for understanding how Powers writes about forests as something greater and other than the human and temporal, thereby asking the reader to accept her place within a larger environment.

### Posthumanist Theory

In harmony with the ecocritical perspective, this work employs posthumanist theorization, paying special attention to Braidotti's definition of posthumanism as a "potential way to re-imagine the primary ontological category of the human in the biogenetic key" (2013, p. 5). Posthumanism is a theoretical framework that is anti-humanist, rejecting the Cartesian idea of humans as an isolated rational individual existing in the world but not of it. The theoretical and methodological framework of this analysis also builds on Donna Haraway's notion of "nature cultures" (2003) based on the understanding that nature and culture cannot be separated in Powers by depicting the protagonists whose identities meld with the trees they come across.

### Narrative Theory

This study also makes use of narrative theory, especially frameworks that are used to understand nonnormative narrative agents. Drawing from David Herman's theory of narratological worldmaking (2013), some principles help explain how Powers designs a world where trees can communicate. Another source by the same author is the paper on 'strange narrators' (Caracciolo, 2016), which defines narrative strategies reflecting non-human subjectivity, which is helpful in understanding how Powers applies language and literature to describe the forest from the perspective of the trees.

### Methodology

This paper relies on a literary approach in analyzing the nature of trees as characters throughout Powers' novel by attending to the author's narrative, characterization, and linguistic features. The analysis focuses particularly on:

1. **Narrative Structure:** Exploring, for example, how the work's four-section structure by the terms 'Roots', 'Trunk', 'Crown', and 'Seeds' that allude to the tree system subverts the typical narrative structure of the three-act play.
2. **Characterization Techniques:** Consider how Powers employs strategies to infuse individual trees and the forest system with personality, agency, and voices.
3. **Linguistic Patterns:** Exploring metaphors and similes used by Powers that relate human beings with trees and other plants and special botany terms.
4. **Temporal Framing:** Analyzing the manner in which the novel portrays future time, from human life cycles to trees' multigenerationariness.

The present research aims to consider the novel in terms of its intersections with Powers' narrative strategies and analyze it within the discourses of ecocriticism and posthumanism to demonstrate its philosophical concept about human-animal relations. The methodology also includes a comparative analysis of Powers' vision of arboreal characters with more conventional treatments of nature in American literature.

### Textual Analysis

#### Trees as Characters: Narrative Agency beyond the Human

A focus on agency, personality, and communicative ability grants trees their bona fide roles as characters in the Overstory. From the novel's opening pages, Powers establishes trees as protagonists with their own stories: "First there was nothing. Then there was everything" (Powers, 2018, p. 3). This cosmic positioning brings trees into the centre of earth drama, focusing on them as inhabitants that existed on earth even earlier than we are and may





even survive us. This is achieved through the portrayal of human stories revolving around and resting within arborescent structures, with the overall plot repeating circles, thus reflecting processes of life.

The most distinctive feature of Powers' method of endowing trees with character is in his discussion of particular tree characters. The giant redwood nicknamed Mimas exemplifies this approach:

The lowest branches of the surrounding pillars are higher than most trees observed back east. However, this one: It is equivalent to one-and-a-half fold or twice the size of the other group. His waist measures 60 cm; that means that his arms spread out could accommodate four others. It is all enshrouded at the top by its crown, situated several hundreds of feet above the ground. She takes pictures. He stands in the foreground, a mile-high redwood toy—another tiny man contributing his poundage to the tree's carbon legacy. The tree runs on the sun and rain, on dirt that has been building itself for aeons, on-air that might have circled the globe thousands of times since the beginning of life and cycling." (Powers, 2018, p. 121)

While Powers does entwine descriptions of the tree that lend the sense of wonder to Mimas as a bare physical entity, he goes further to ascribe the functions of growth, nutrient cycling, and exchange of gases to the tree. This language of running means that the tree has intention and actively participates in various modes of accepting inputs instead of just passively receiving them. Speaking of Mimas, one can describe it as another character that is depicted in the novel experiencing germination, development, threat, and even information exchange with the main characters.

Powers scientifically build on tree characters and assign voices to forests of diverse kinds. When Patricia Westerford, the novel's scientist-character, discovers evidence of tree communication, Powers writes:

In a forest, there are no people, and there are no distinct occurrences. The bird and the branch it perches on are one thing. It is pointed out that up to a third of the food that a big tree makes could be eaten by other organisms. It is very interesting to know that even different kinds of trees also develop mutual relationships. Hence, cutting a birch tree may potentially harm a Douglas fir tree in the neighbourhood since its leading shoots of branches converse, as do its emerging forks. Now the mute, patient beings can speak to her, telling her what they want, things they need." (Powers, 2018, p. 143)

This deconstructs the organism-environment divide and turns forests into speaking beings, wherein trees are quite like sentient beings interacting with each other. Through scientific concepts such as carbon sharing and chemical signalling, Powers locates his characters in what James Hurt (2008) calls a "narrative ecology" that allows trees to be read like characters.

Of all the ways the novel creates the character status of trees, this is most poignant in figuring trees as communicative agents. In the story, an effort is made to establish an interaction with the tree through different forms of communication. Nick Hoel experiences this communication while photographing Chestnut:

This is shared with Event and Derrida's later, more elaborate notions of the tree, which is saying things in words before words. It speaks in giants' slow syllables, which are as old as the world itself. Listen, it says. There is something you need to hear." (Powers, 2018, p. 69)



These events instead imply not just that the trees are sentient but that they are actively seeking to bring the universes of people and trees closer together. Powers thusly endow trees with what narratologist James Phelan (2005) characterizes as “mimetic function,” the ability to represent themselves as real actors while, at the same time, stressing their difference, their reality of temporal and spatial registers beyond the human experience.

### **Temporal Disorientation: Challenging Anthropocentric Time**

Powers does this at length to reimagine long and short-term human chronologies through arboreal ones, a practice Nixon (2011) has described as temporal disorientation. The novel opens with a sweeping temporal perspective that immediately establishes trees as beings whose existence transcends human historical frameworks:

The tree has existed for many hundred years. It drinks rain, exhales mist, and sequesters carbon better than any device that artificial logic can invent. It is the place where the number of living creatures exceeds the number of people in a town... It was warned when the exact beings planning their existence were simply an experiment. It will be here when the humans are gone." (Powers, 2018, p. 16)

This verse situates trees not as participants in history or as elements that form a part of history but as observers of history. This challenges the conventional socialist view of history, where history is the story of human events. To achieve that, the author uses many strategies related to the manipulation of time. Powers deliberately uses the technique of time compression and time expansion; it is possible to read about centuries of growth in a few lines, yet the author has explored dozens of pages to express this perception of time.

The character of Dr. Patricia Westerford articulates this alternative temporality most explicitly when she observes: ‘This is not our world with trees in it.’ This is Powers’ description of the world with non-human agents as trees and people as newcomers in the sense of global technology (Powers, 2018, p. 424). This declaration sums up what environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2019) calls the “Symbiocene”: a refashioning of Earth’s past in which people are not lords but interlopers in permanent ecologies. By incessantly referencing trees’ endurance, Powers builds what scholar Timothy Morton (2013) terms temporal undulation, making readers oscillate between human and non-human temporalities.

From this perspective, the novel’s structure also serves to establish such temporal reorientation. Its four parts—“Roots,” “Trunk,” “Crown,” and “Seeds”—also correspond to the tree metaphor in a temporal manner: “Roots” conveys the origin, “Trunk” signifies the current activity, “Crown” depicts the blossoming of numerous storylines, and “Seeds” portrays plots in probable futures. This structure challenges linear progression, instead proposing what Patricia Westerford calls “the great procession.”

It runs between ten thousand futures as if the world is a boat that is blown on the sea of the future. Thus, no creature on the face of the earth shall not, in one way or another, be changed. Any of the futures that are ahead from now remain unknown in how they will be like any of the pasts. However, people have to continue living with that hope, or else they will go mad. Moreover, Patricia would have told him that, had she lived, everything would still change faster." (Powers, 2018, p. 474)

In that way, Powers offers a disorientating passage through time that undermines anthropocentric understandings of history. In her essay *Conversation about Japanese Disaster and Time*, environmental philosopher Deborah Bird Rose (2012) adds that such



temporal disorientation within a longer environmental history can have a liberating and ethically effective purpose.

### **Scientific Knowledge and Literary Imagination**

In this aspect, *The Overstory* sets itself apart from the usual treatments of the genre: Powers not only posits philosophy but brings botany into his narrative structure as well. Where other texts keep scientific knowledge distinct from narrativity, Powers intertwines scientific knowing with a character's consciousness/subjectivity to produce what Heather Houser has aptly titled an 'infographic imagination' in which abstract concepts related to ecology are given an affective dimension.

Patricia Westerford relates to the fictitious tree communication networks and tree families, which are reminiscent of actual revelations by Suzanne Simard and Peter Wohlleben. When Patricia publishes her controversial findings about tree communication, Powers writes:

"Patricia has trees that are more social than she could have imagined." There are no individuals. There are not even separate species. No phenomenon in the forest belongs to another entity besides the forest or is not the forest. It is pertinent to mention this right now: competition is unthinkable without an infinite number of variations in cooperation. Trees fight no more than do the leaves on a single tree." (Powers, 2018, p. 142)

It builds upon the topic of the mycorrhizal networks and chemical messages between trees. Still, it does it in a way that spectators following this Calderon performance can easily understand despite all necessary key notes of the scientific approach being preserved. Powers are very careful not to fall into 'the pedagogical trap' that, according to Richard Kerridge (2014), often occurs in environmental literature and entails the authors simply teaching the readers instead of including them in a meaningful story.

Powers' scientific integration is not only reflected in the setting but is also present in his descriptions of trees throughout the novel, including in reference to Patricia's study. When describing the American chestnut's catastrophic decline, he writes:

Chestnut blight is discovered on a shipment of Asian nursery stock imported to the Bronx Zoo. The pathogen is *Cryphonectria parasitica*, which is an obligate parasite that forms little spore pustules which rupture through the bark of the American chestnut trees to emit a foul odour. A few decades, and the fungus wipes the species from the face of a continent." (Powers, 2018, p. 70)

This passage blurs the line between scientific research: "obligate parasite," "*Cryphonectria parasitica*," and the sickening smell '!', and the romance of the land: "dying ecosystem" and "the United States' economic collapse." These are scientific facts but are written in such a manner that they start blending with American tragedy. Facts that turn to landscapes are scientific pastoral, as defined by Greg Garrard (2012).

The novel's representations of forest ecology draw heavily on recent scientific discoveries about tree communication networks, often called the "wood wide web." When Douglas Pavlicek visits an old-growth forest, Powers writes:

The air is viral with spores and pheromones – signals that Douglas shall never breathe... The air is rife with narratives. The neighbours are in every direction, at all times, sharing food, forwarding alerts, sending out mutual aid, transmitting the lessons of experience, and even fattening up their progeny to make their way in the world." (Powers, 2018, p. 116)

In attributing 'conversations' to chemical processes while being scientifically appropriate about pheromonal messages, Powers brings out what Bruno Latour (2004) conceptualised





as 'matters of concern', where they involve scientific issues, values, and emotions. This technique lets Powers make what would possibly be scientifically abstract and uninteresting relevant and engaging to the story in ways that serve both purposes of a plot and themes.

### **Human-Tree Relationships: From Exploitation to Kinship**

The Overstory portrays an arc of change in humans' social interaction with trees from domination to acceptance, to what Kohn (2013) refers to as an 'of selves' paradigm where nonhuman entities are viewed as agents rather than subjects. This change is especially prominently felt in the nine human characters whose personal development involves a transition or change in attitudes toward trees.

At the beginning of the play, the characters act in a way that Val Plumwood (1993) defined as colonial logic, which involves regarding nature as an object rather than a subject. The Hoel family, for instance, begins by clearing forests to establish their farm:

"Jørgen Hoel starts his new farm on a rolling patch cleared of all trees, save for the one enormous chestnut his bride begs him to keep as shade for their home... Three people could link arms around the trunk and not touch fingers." (Powers, 2018, p. 9)

This passage sets a tone in which trees are depicted as hindrances to the advancement of civilization, save for the tree that may be useful to human beings. Similarly, when corporate lawyer Ray Brinkman first meets Dorothy Cazaly, their conversation reveals conventional anthropocentric assumptions:

She once speaks to him about what new life would he like to lead if he would be reborn. 'Human,' he says at once. 'Is there any other answer?' 'Of course, there is! You could come back as anything.' 'Yeah, but...why would anyone want to be anything but human?' (Powers, 2018, p. 25)

Powers presents Ray's inability to find meaning in the functionality of other species as a common lack of ecological thinking. The novel charts these characters' evolution toward what ecophilosopher David Abram (1996) calls "reciprocity with the more-than-human world." After experiencing a near-death experience, Ray begins to observe the trees in his yard with new attention:

'They are beautiful, these slow animals which have no gait, 'the No-Go creatures'. Despite my best efforts, the project that Ray did with Dorothy needed infinite patience to work out. Nothing more ambitious than: Watch. Every month, the wheelchair makes one round within the yard. When he finishes, Ray can remember how everything looked the month before and guess at what changes the coming month will bring.' (Powers, 2018, p. 368)

Ray's new relationship with trees consists of the secular form of epiphany described by philosopher Walter Benjamin—the ability to see the sacred in the mundane. When Ray starts perceiving the swaying of trees and acknowledging his physical frailty, he attains the kind of "symbiotic personhood" that Glenn Albrecht (2019) describes, an identity defined by connections with nonhuman entities.

This is the most extreme form of the process in the character of Olivia Vandergriff/Maidenhair, who is able to converse with trees after a traumatic accident. Her subsequent activism stems from what she perceives as an ethical mandate from the trees themselves:

The things she has been sent to save communicate with her in tones that her fingertips are sensitive enough to pick. These presences insist that they are carrying an important



message. The words are silent, but she hears the truth as she approaches him. The smell of resins unlooses something in her brain—the rings of a redwood, thirty million minutes of tree life, spiralling in bursts of creation too slow for humans to see." (Powers, 2018, p. 182)

In the manner that Powers reinforces Olivia, one may think of what Indigenous philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte (2018) has labelled collective continuance—the notion that humans only thrive in tandem with the rest of the beings that surround them. In terms of the former perspective, environmental protection changes from individual perception to being firmly grounded in unavoidable physical reality.

This message points to the future when people will respect trees not only as dead matter but as their relatives; as suggested by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), the concept of the grammar of animacy means in linguistically and conceptually grounded ways to recognize the agency of the more-than-human world. As Patricia Westerford observes near the novel's end:

It means that no matter how well you explain something, a change of mind is not possible. The only thing that can do that is a good story. Moreover, those stories we tell each other—about who we are, where we came from, what will happen to us, whether the world has meaning, and what that meaning might be—will save or destroy everything we have ever loved." (Powers, 2018, p. 511)

This suggests that literature not only reflects trees but can also change how readers perceive them through empathic reading.

### **Formal Innovation and Ecological Representation**

The style of *The Overstory* is about structure and innovation; the style of *The Overstory* represents ecology. With nine individual characters whose narratives are gradually linked together, the overall structure of the novel contributes to what literary scholar Ursula Heise (2008) defines as 'eco-cosmopolitanism' as hinted at in the narrative structure.

In the novel's first chapters, the reader is introduced to clearly defined human figures whose existence is portrayed as unrelated to one another. Slowly, one is linked with another and another through incidents and destiny and bonds with certain trees. This phenomenon is precisely what ecologists describe as "emergent properties", a property of a system that has characteristics that cannot be seen in any of the parts when one considers each component individually. As Powers writes:

"What you make from a tree should be at least as miraculous as what you cut down." (Powers, 2018, p. 232)

This statement is ironically a metafictional reflection on the novel that tries to construct something from trees—in both the physical sense as the source of paper and the symbolic or thematic sense as the figures of trees in the narrative.

The considerations can also be analyzed through the lens of shelf-life, as well as the indicators of an ecological interconnection that is narratively manifest through Powers' fluidity in crossing characters and timelines. Free indirect discourse is often used in the novel, and it erases the difference between the narrator and the main character, which gives rise to what Morton, an ecocritic, calls "ambient poetics," or the blurring of foreground and background. When Adam Appich studies collective behaviour in the forest protesters, Powers Writes

This is what is happening to him in front of so many people. His data pool has transformed him into an oddity in the experiment. These people, these forest defenders: He has never



seen more people who seem more barren like the trees. Something is lifting him and carrying him back downstream, backwards, heading home." (Powers, 2018, p. 290)

The combining of Adam's point of view with that of the narrator contributes to an unstable self that reflects the book's environmental motifs. This technique reaches its culmination in the novel's final section, where perspective shifts to an ambiguous "we" that might encompass both human and arboreal consciousness:

Nevertheless, the full silent tale of the air is audible only to those who hear it. It came down to a point that even the creatures of the earth are in a way communicating. The sounds of their countless conversations drift across the land, soft and sculpted, like a score for woodwinds." (Powers, 2018, p. 502)

This perspective shift is an apt representation of what Iovino called the "extra human narrative agency"—stories that illustrate nonhuman entities as coproducers of meaning. Using a more formal register, Powers ensures that the ecological vision he is proposing also resonates in the language he uses. The narrative includes detailed descriptions of trees and has many scientifically accurate names of trees and descriptions of their utility. Instead of distancing the reader, it accomplishes what ecocritic Robert Macfarlane (2015) termed as counter-desecration—writing in a way that returns focus to aspects of the natural world that are otherwise flattened by generic language. When Powers describes the chestnut's leaves, he writes:

Measures five inches in length and has rough edges and serrations that appear to be curved on the sides. It is unsure whether or not it has notches or a bristly tip like that of an oak. Not oval, like a beech. Straight-grained, brittle, and porous. Smooth, waxy, and dark green, with straight parallel veins from the central stem to the saw-toothed edges." (Powers, 2018, p. 6)

This precise description prepares readers for paying attention to certain details of plants; it helps to develop what environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2017) refers to as *solī philia*—affection toward and stewardship of place and its qualities.

### Conclusion

The Overstory is a crucial intervention in modern environmental literature because it transforms trees into active characters. Powers's predominantly tree-focused picaresque style enables him to explore human-foraged interactions with forests through characters who experience natural interactions. Through their use of literary devices, authors challenge traditional Western literary traditions, which reinforce that trees exist only as natural resources or visual settings.

The novel establishes an eco-humanist perspective that humans are one of many species within web-like ecological systems where they inhabit their natural position. Kimmerer (2013) argues against Western cultural attitudes that separate humans from nature by demonstrating reciprocal human duties toward the "more-than-human world." Through the integration of evolutionary tree data with documented individual accounts, Powers creates his fictional world to establish natural relationships and biological aspects.

Powers accomplishes this reorientation through multiple strategies: temporal disorientation juxtaposes human and arboreal timescales, and through its framing of human characters as tree roots, it explores the developmental aspects of both nature and humanity across the text. Through these methods, writers establish what Timothy Morton (2010) calls ecological thought, where species develop deep interconnected knowledge of each other. Through its narrative, the novel successfully performs the intelligent tasks it



depicts, which instruct readers to notice relationships that regular seeing methods normally conceal.

Beyond breaking new artistic ground, the novel engages in active moral interventions. It shows how alternate states of consciousness help readers escape traditional human distancing from natural systems. Through its storytelling, the novel guides readers toward "participation," just as phenomenologist David Abram (1996) describes it between people and their natural environment. The novel presents scientific research by depicting Patricia Westerford and Olivia Vandergriff, who show the connection between trees and humans and how this relationship leads to activism.

The narrative techniques Powers uses establish literary experiences which deliver eco-education by developing a love for living alongside other life forms (as defined by ecophilosopher Glenn Albrecht (2019)). The novel portrays trees as living beings, which can transform readers' beliefs about trees and lead to new understanding through Raymond Williams's (1977) described "structures of feeling." By attributing sentience, communication, and intention to trees, Powers makes what many indigenous knowledge systems have long recognized thinkable: Human beings form relationships with nonhuman kin, which connect them to larger webs of interconnectedness.

The literary construction in the text layers an ethical structure. "Seeds" concludes the narrative of "The Overstory," while "Roots" comes first, followed by "Trunk" before reaching the end in "Crown", where the story combines the natural growth patterns of trees with non-linear plot variations. William Cronon (1992) defines "storied residence" through his observation about the way people understand their existence within multiple overlapping narratives instead of following a single heroic journey format. The narrative adopts an eco-cosmopolitan perspective to combine various spatial and temporal dimensions in its discussion of traditional anthropocentric literary structures (Vizcarra et al. 2008).

Through its scientific knowledge integration, The Overstory develops its eco-humanist perspective. By incorporating biological evidence into his fictional worlds, Powers removes any notion of scientific independence from imaginative literature. Scientists and experts analyze tree communication systems similarly to how Bruno Latour (2004) defines "matters of concern" as scientific knowledge that encompasses ethical weight and value. Through narrative techniques, Powers merges "two cultures", as defined by C.P. Snow, to show that environmental action needs both emotional and scientific foundations.

The narrative of the novel illustrates eco-humanist ethics by showing different types of interactions between humans and trees. Alternative hedonism became the new lifestyle choice for Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly, according to Kate Soper, who defined this approach as enjoying nature without using its resources in 1995. This transformation suggests what environmental ethicist Kathleen Dean Moore (2016) identifies as the essential environmental task: True environmental work demands both nature protection and a change in human perspective from the view of exceptionalism to an understanding of ecological intrinsicness.

The text within Powers' novel uses naturalistic writing techniques to portray several environmental threats that trees face due to climate change, logging activities, and habitat splitting. According to philosopher Martha Nussbaum, meaningful environmental action requires "narrative imagination", which means seeing value in nonhuman beings while





understanding how human well-being depends on ecosystem health. In conclusion, the story applies tree DNA to encode human statements as Deborah Bird Rose (2011) uses her "multispecies knots of ethical time" theory to explore species-time commitments.

Environmental philosopher Deborah Bird Rose (2011) shows through his phase "multispecies knots of ethical time" that actions in both present and future times generate responsibilities between different species through the use of DNA encoding in trees. By mobilizing Macy's theory of "active hope" (2012), Grosvenor achieves an active resistance and preservation that can benefit generations across different timescales. According to philosopher Joanna Macy (2012), active hope exists through preservation and resistance acts, which Powers integrates into his narrative, leading to enduring ecological effects after human lifespans.

Literary innovation, along with ecological necessity, suggests that our stories about trees will shape their destiny, although it affects our destiny, too. The narrative structure that transforms trees into active characters in his work leads Powers to construct literary narratives which can teach us about environmental practices in addition to reading comprehension. Patricia Westerford asserts that "The best arguments in the world will not change a person's mind" (Powers, 2018, p. 511). A good story has the power to transform everything, according to Powers (2018, p. 511). The story structure in Powers' work allows trees to take control while inspiring hopeful changes in human perceptions of their role in ecology.

Lawrence Buell (1995) designates "The Overstory" as an "environmental text" because the story develops trees into characters who display temporal and scientific methods that reveal human-natural habitat evolution. The novel establishes itself as an ecological intervention through its characterization of trees, followed by experimental storytelling methods and technical contents related to tree-human relations, according to literary critic Lawrence Buell (1995). The current era of rapid environmental transformation reveals to us through Powers' work that our storytelling approaches regarding trees could define both the fate of forests and their protected species during upcoming centuries.

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