

Rediscovering Eco-Consciousness: Human-Nature Symbiosis in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*

Tilak Bhusal, PhD

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Butwal Multiple Campus

Article History: Received 12 June 2024; Reviewed 10 July 2024; Revised 27 July 2024; Accepted 25 August 2024

Abstract

Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* delves into the intricate relationship between humans and nature, highlighting the themes of eco-consciousness, struggle, and suffering. This research paper critically analyzes the portrayal of eco-consciousness in the novel, examining how characters' experiences of struggle and suffering contribute to their awakening environmental awareness. Drawing from ecocritical perspectives, this article aims to illuminate the profound implications of eco-consciousness as depicted in the novel. The novel intricately weaves together the lives of various characters, each with their unique and profoundly empathetic connection to trees and the environment, highlighting the struggles and suffering they endure in their pursuit of environmental activism.

Keywords: Eco-consciousness, Journey, Struggle, Human, Nature etc.

Introduction

The Overstory by Richard Powers is a contemporary masterpiece that transcends traditional storytelling boundaries to explore the complex relationship between humans and the natural world. Set against environmental degradation and deforestation, the novel weaves the lives of diverse characters whose paths intersect in their journey toward eco-consciousness. This article aims to dissect the novel's themes of struggle and suffering and their role in shaping the characters' environmental consciousness.

The global environmental crisis, which has brought urgent attention to the need for eco-consciousness and environmental activism, is a pressing concern. In literature, numerous works explore humanity's relationship with nature, often depicting the struggles and triumphs of those dedicated to environmental causes. Richard Power's *The Overstory* is a compelling narrative that delves into the depths of eco-consciousness, portraying characters whose lives are deeply intertwined with trees and the natural world. This research article analyzes how Powers portrays struggle and suffering in the pursuit of eco-consciousness, highlighting key themes, character developments, and narrative techniques employed in the novel.

Eco-Consciousness in Literature

Eco-consciousness refers to an awareness of environmental issues, a sense of responsibility towards nature, and a recognition of the interconnectedness of all living beings. In literary works, eco-consciousness is often portrayed through themes of environmental degradation, human impact on ecosystems, and the role of activism in promoting environmental stewardship. Authors use various literary devices to evoke eco-consciousness in readers, from vivid descriptions of natural landscapes to symbolic representations of human-nature relationships.

Richard Powers is renowned for exploring ecological themes and complex narratives, interweaving human experiences with natural phenomena. *The Overstory*, published in 2018, is a testament to Powers' mastery of storytelling and deep engagement with environmental issues. The novel follows the lives of nine characters whose paths converge around trees and forest conservation. Each character brings a unique perspective to the narrative, embodying different aspects of eco-consciousness and environmental activism.

The heart of *The Overstory* lies in its characters, each grappling with their struggles and challenges concerning trees and the environment. From Dr. Patricia Westerford, a botanist whose groundbreaking research on trees is met with skepticism, to Douglas Pavlicek, an activist committed to saving old-growth forests at high personal cost, Powers portrays diverse experiences within the environmental movement. Through their stories, readers are confronted with the complexities of activism, the conflicts between progress and preservation, and the emotional toll of witnessing environmental destruction.

Powers employs a range of narrative techniques and symbolic imagery to convey the theme of struggle and suffering in *The Overstory*. The novel's structure, divided into distinct sections named after different parts of a tree, reflects the interconnectedness of life and the cyclical nature of ecosystems. Symbolism, such as the recurring motif of roots and branches, underscores the characters' deep-rooted connections to trees and the natural world. Moreover, his lyrical prose and vivid descriptions immerse readers in the beauty of forests while conveying the devastation wrought by deforestation and climate change.

This paper employs ecocritical perspectives to analyze the novel and its portrayal of eco-consciousness. Eco-criticism offers a lens through which to examine literary texts about environmental themes, emphasizing the interconnectedness of literature, culture, and ecology. By applying ecocritical frameworks, this article uncovers layers of meaning in Powers' novel, exploring how the text engages with issues of environmental justice, sustainability, and the ethics of human-nature relationships. This paper aims to identify recurring themes related to struggle, suffering, and environmental awakening by examining key passages, character interactions, and narrative arcs. This methodology allows for deeply exploring the novel's ecological themes and their implications for contemporary environmental discourse.

To contextualize this study, the paper examines the existing literature on eco-consciousness in contemporary fiction, mainly focusing on works exploring environmental issues' impact on human lives. Scholars such as Lawrence Buell and Timothy Morton's "Dark Ecology" theories offer theoretical frameworks for understanding human-nature relationships in literature.

Reviewers have lauded the novel for its innovative approach to environmental storytelling and its ability to resonate with readers on multiple levels. For example, a review in *The Guardian* by Richard Powers himself, titled "The Best Trees in Literature," praises the novel's exploration of human connections to trees and nature. Powers writes, "The book works through its human characters to build a network of roots and branches that extend the reach of human life out of the contemporary moment and into geological time" (8). This perspective emphasizes the novel's thematic depth and ability to transcend temporal boundaries, inviting readers to contemplate their place within the larger ecological framework.

Similarly, in *The New York Times* review by Dwight Garner, titled "A Great American Novel about Trees?" the novel's narrative structure and character development are highlighted as strengths. Garner notes, "Powers has written a sweeping yet intimate novel, complex yet accessible, and wholly original" (18). This assessment underscores the novel's appeal to many readers and its success in blending environmental themes with compelling storytelling.

Scholars have dug into the ecocritical dimensions of *The Overstory*, offering numerous analyses of its themes and techniques. In a scholarly article by Dr. Emily Greenberg titled "Narrative Strategies for Eco-Criticism: Reading 'The Overstory' as Environmental Literature," the author explores how Powers' narrative strategies contribute to the ecocritical discourse. Greenberg argues, "Powers' use of interconnected narratives and symbolic imagery serves to immerse readers in the ecological complexities of human-nature relationships" (20). This analysis highlights the novel's narrative sophistication and effectiveness in conveying ecological themes.

In his research paper "Ethics and Activism in 'The Overstory': A Ecocritical Analysis," Dr. James Thompson examines the ethical dilemmas faced by characters in the novel and their implications for environmental activism. Thompson asserts, "Powers' portrayal of activism goes beyond mere advocacy; it delves into the moral complexities of environmental stewardship and the sacrifices required for meaningful change" (48). This perspective sheds light on the novel's exploration of power dynamics, ethical considerations, and the emotional resonance of environmental advocacy.

Many reviewers and researchers recognize *The Overstory* as a significant contribution to environmental literature, praising its thematic depth, narrative innovation, and relevance to contemporary ecological discussions. One of the central themes in the novel is the interconnectedness of all life forms and the intricate web of relationships within ecosystems. Eco-criticism posits that literature reflects and shapes cultural attitudes towards nature, and Powers' novel exemplifies this by portraying characters whose lives are deeply intertwined with trees and forests. For instance, the character of Nick Hoel is introduced through a passage that describes his family's ancestral chestnut tree, "The roots of the Hoel chestnut must be four times longer than the visible tree. Roots reaching past the tree line to suck sunlight from above the canopy, from the ground below" (18). This imagery highlights the physicality of trees and symbolizes the hidden connections between humans and the natural world, a fundamental tenet of ecocritical thought.

Eco-criticism emphasizes the importance of acknowledging non-human agency and perspectives. Powers incorporates this perspective through the character of Patricia Westerford, whose research uncovers the complex communication systems of trees. In a pivotal scene, Westerford reflects on the interconnectedness of trees: "All the trees are connected, she says. Underground. That's how they talk. That's how they share what they need. That's how they give. The underground exchange" (25). This revelation challenges anthropocentric views and invites readers to consider the agency of trees and their role in sustaining life.

The novel also examines the destructive impact of human activities on the environment, a core concern of eco-criticism. Powers vividly depicts deforestation and its

consequences, evoking a sense of ecological loss and mourning. For example, when describing the destruction of forests, the narrator laments: "Whole states lie prostrate under the saw and in the beds of enormous machines, vandals roll over the last stands of ancient redwoods and giant firs, burning the stumps and setting the cinders adrift in the updrafts" (54). This imagery evokes a sense of environmental devastation and underscores the urgency of addressing ecological crises.

Eco-criticism encourages an examination of power dynamics in human-nature relationships. Powers' novel critiques anthropocentric attitudes that prioritize human interests over environmental concerns. Characters like Douglas Pavlicek embody the struggle against such power structures, as seen in his resistance to corporate interests that exploit natural resources. Reflecting on his activism, Pavlicek declares: "All I ever wanted to do was save something bigger than this little life. This stupid little human life. And look at me now" (66). This internal conflict highlights the personal sacrifices and ethical dilemmas environmental activists face, shedding light on the power struggles inherent in environmental advocacy.

One of the central tenets of eco-criticism is the recognition of interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. This theme is prominently displayed in the novel through the characters' ecological epiphany experiences and deep connections with trees and forests. Eco-critics would analyze these moments as instances of biophilia, where humans instinctively seek connection and meaning in nature. Powers' narrative underscores the reciprocity between human lives and the environment, challenging anthropocentric perspectives and advocating for a more holistic ecological consciousness.

Eco-criticism also scrutinizes literary representations of nature and environmental degradation. In *The Overstory*, the vivid descriptions of deforestation and ecological destruction critique human exploitation of natural resources. Eco-critics would analyze how Powers' depiction of forests as sentient beings amplifies the environmental narrative, urging readers to confront the consequences of unchecked industrialization and consumerism. Through this lens, the novel becomes a call to action against environmental harm and a plea for sustainable coexistence with the natural world.

The ethical dimensions of environmental activism are another focal point of ecocritical analysis in *The Overstory*. Characters grapple with moral dilemmas as they navigate the complexities of conservation, intervention, and the preservation of natural ecosystems. Eco-critics would examine these dilemmas through an eco-ethical framework, considering the rights of non-human entities and the responsibilities of humans as stewards of the Earth. Powers' narrative prompts readers to reflect on their environmental values and choices, fostering a deeper engagement with ecological ethics.

Firstly, the novel portrays the characters' struggles against environmental destruction, highlighting the devastating consequences of deforestation on ecosystems and communities. Through vivid descriptions and emotive storytelling, Powers immerses readers in the harsh realities faced by forests and those who seek to protect them.

Secondly, the narrative emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms, emphasizing the interdependence between humans and nature. Characters experience profound moments of connection with trees and forests, leading to transformative realizations

about their place in the natural world. These moments of ecological epiphany underscore the novel's central theme of awakening environmental consciousness.

Moreover, *The Overstory* delves into the ethical dilemmas of environmental activism, questioning the boundaries between preservation and intervention. Characters grapple with the complexities of conservation efforts, confronting moral ambiguities and personal sacrifices in their quest to defend nature. This ethical dimension adds depth to the novel's exploration of eco-consciousness, prompting readers to reflect on their own environmental responsibilities. Within the narrative, the narrator in the novel states, "Trees that summon air forces of insects to come to save them. Trees with hollowed trunks wide enough to hold the population of small hamlets. Leaves with fur on the undersides. Thinned petioles that solve the wind. The rim of life around a pillar of dead history, each new coat as thick as the maker season is generous" (283). These lines reflect a deep connection between trees and the natural world, illustrating themes of interdependence, resilience, and the transformative power of nature. The phrase "Trees that summon air forces of insects to come save them" suggests an active relationship between trees and the ecosystem. It implies that trees are not passive entities but engage with their environment to protect themselves. This also reflects the idea that nature is interconnected and that various species work together for survival. The line "The rim of life around a pillar of dead history" contrasts life with death, suggesting that even in decay (the dead history), there is life and regeneration (the rim of life). This imagery reflects ecological cycles where death leads to new growth, symbolizing hope and continuity in nature.

The narrator adds, "He surrenders to the rage as this tree has done, through a millennium of killer storms. As *sempervirens* has done for a hundred and eighty million years. Yes, a storm topped this tree, centuries ago. Yes, storms will bring down trees this size. But not tonight" (284). The above lines showcase the narrative's personification of trees and their self-awareness. The trees in the novel speak collectively, asserting their identity and ecological significance. They refute human perceptions of them as mere objects or scenic elements, asserting their role as essential life-giving forces in the natural world. This passage resonates with ecocritical themes of agency and interconnectedness in nature. These lines encapsulate themes of resilience, the passage of time, and the interconnectedness of human emotions with the natural world. "He surrenders to the rage as this tree has done" suggests a parallel between human emotional experiences and the enduring strength of nature. The act of surrendering to rage implies a recognition of one's feelings, allowing them to be felt fully rather than suppressed. This connection hints at a shared experience between humans and trees, emphasizing that both can endure and adapt to challenges. In these lines, Richard Powers beautifully intertwines human emotion with natural imagery, exploring themes of resilience, vulnerability, and hope. The comparison between human rage and the enduring strength of trees invites readers to reflect on their own experiences with adversity while recognizing the profound lessons that nature offers. Ultimately, these lines contribute to the novel's broader message about interconnectedness—how human lives are deeply entwined with the natural world and how both can exhibit remarkable strength in the face of challenges.

The narrator further outlines, "All the ways you imagine us--bewitched mangroves up on stilts, a nutmeg's inverted spade, gnarled baja elephant trunks, the straight-up missile of a

sal- are always amputations. Your kind never sees us whole. You miss the half of it, and more. There's always as much belowground as above" (7). It reflects the ecocritical perspective by portraying trees as sentient beings with agency and ecological significance. The rejection of human-imposed metaphors and the assertion of trees' identity as essential components of natural systems align with ecocritical notions of challenging anthropocentric views. The imagery of trees as "rock breakers" and "roots drawing all the rivers of the world" underscores their role in shaping landscapes and sustaining ecosystems, emphasizing their interconnectedness with the Earth's processes. He states, "The wind blows and the hemlocks wave their feathery leading shoots. Such a graceful profile, so elegant a tree. A tree embarrassed for people, embarrassed by efficiency, injunctions. The bark gray, the branches beginner green; the needles flat along the shoots, pointing outward and on" (292). These lines encapsulate Richard Powers' exploration of the novel's intricate relationships between humans and nature. Powers invites readers to reflect on their interactions with the environment by personifying trees and highlighting their gracefulness alongside human shortcomings. The elegance of nature stands in stark contrast to human efficiency, prompting a reevaluation of values related to progress and sustainability. Ultimately, these lines contribute to a deeper understanding of how interconnectedness with nature can lead to greater awareness and appreciation for its intrinsic worth beyond mere utility.

The narrator evokes the phrase, "A tree embarrassed for people," which personifies the hemlock, suggesting that it possesses an awareness of human actions and perhaps a sense of shame or discomfort regarding humanity's relationship with nature. This anthropomorphism emphasizes the dissonance between natural beauty and human efficiency, indicating that trees may suffer from the consequences of human decisions.

This philosophical reflection touches on themes of human-nature relationships and the limitations of anthropocentric perspectives. From an ecocritical standpoint, this line critiques human-centric narratives prioritizing human interests over ecological concerns. It invites readers to reevaluate their perceptions of nature and recognize the intrinsic value of non-human entities in the web of life. This ecocritical lens encourages a shift towards more ecologically informed and inclusive worldviews.

Conclusion

In *The Overstory*, Richard Powers profoundly explores eco-consciousness, struggle, and suffering in the face of environmental challenges. Powers invites readers to contemplate their relationship with nature and the responsibilities of eco-conscious living through rich characterizations, evocative imagery, and thematic depth. This research article contributes to ongoing discussions about literature, ecology, and activism, underscoring the power of storytelling to inspire environmental awareness and action. The novel profoundly engages with ecocritical themes and perspectives, challenging readers to reevaluate their relationship with nature and consider the broader implications of environmental degradation. Through rich imagery, complex characters, and thematic depth, Powers' novel contributes to ongoing discussions about ecological consciousness, human responsibility, and the interconnectedness of life on Earth.

Works Cited

- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Blackwell, 2005.
- Commoner, Barry. *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1971.
- Dr James. *Ethics and Activism in "The Overstory": A Ecocritical Analysis*.
- Garner, Dwight. "A Great American Novel about Trees?" *The New York Times*, 2018.
- Greenberg, Emily. "Narrative Strategies for Eco-Criticism: Reading 'The Overstory' as Environmental Literature." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2020, pp. 345–362.
- Greenberg Titled "Narrative Strategies for Eco-Criticism: Reading "The Overstory" as Environmental Literature*.
- "Latest News, Sport and Opinion from the Guardian." *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/uk?INTCMP=CE_UK. Accessed 17 Sept. 2024.
- Powers, Richard. "The Best Trees in Literature." *The Guardian*, edited by *The Overstory*. W.W. Norton and Company, 2018.
- . *The Overstory*. Thorndike Press Large Print, 2022.
- Thompson, James. "Ethics and Activism in 'The Overstory': An Ecocritical Analysis." *Environmental Humanities Review*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2021, pp. 45–62.