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Posthuman and Anthropocene Interpretations of Richard Powers's *The Overstory*

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***Abstract*—*The Overstory,* a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Richard Powers, explores contemporary ecological fiction through a sustained portrayal of environmental concerns and the relationship between humans and nature. Powers's storytelling brilliantly joins the human with the nonhuman and dismantles anthropocentrism. This paper applies Posthumanism, Anthropocene theory, and Eco-wisdom theory to examine the novel's narrative complexity and its nuanced portrayal of nonhuman worlds. Together, these theories reveal how Powers challenges anthropocentrism and reconstructs the relationship between humans and the environment. Drawing on the theories of Haraway (2016), Braidotti (2013), and Chakrabarty (2021), this paper argues that Powers unsettles species boundaries by representing trees as sentient planetary agents. *The Overstory* envisions compassionate, humble, and mutually sustaining relations that align with the emerging field of environmental humanities. Finally, *The Overstory* builds a planetary consciousness and urges readers to think beyond the human.**

***Index Terms*—environmental humanities, eco-wisdom, posthumanism, Anthropocene, climate justice**

I. Introduction

The ecological crisis of the 20th century had a profound impact on literature as attitudes to nature shifted. Novels like *Hard Times* (1854) by Charles Dickens and *North and South* (1855) by Elizabeth Gaskell engaged with capitalist structures and technologies in the early industrial novel. Mid-century literature, such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), brought environmental concerns to public discourse, heightening moral awareness. In the late 20th century, a second wave of environmental literature challenged the enduring impacts of industrial modernity on ecological and human well-being. Authors such as Annie Dillard, Barbara Kingsolver, and Margaret Atwood reconsidered the environment as a narrative force. This convergence is reflected in works such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) and Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), which weave literary narrative, ethics, and ecology together, as outlined by Heise (2008) and Chakrabarty (2021).

A new genre of literature, known as climate fiction, allows more people to learn about the climate crisis than traditional presentations of the issue. Rather than using statistics or theories, Ferguson et al. (2025) argue that climate fiction places readers in scenarios that allow them to grapple with contemporary climate change and envision other, more desirable outcomes. This is why *The Overstory* is such important literature; it transforms the inevitable devastation of forests' future from an abstract future into something emotionally and personally vital. It makes the climate crisis intellectually, ethically, and emotionally engaging.

There is an increasing amount of literature describing the development of new storytelling that is more relational, more attuned to the world, and less focused on humans. Traditional narratives are giving way to stories that invite the participation of active voices among animals, plants, landscapes, and entire worlds. Heise (2008) suggests that climate

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fiction is an effective form of eco-cosmopolitanism, challenging not only anthropocentrism but also extending ethical responsibility to all forms of life on Earth. Chakrabarty (2021) argues that climate disaster collapses the boundaries between the human and natural history, calling us to reimagine ourselves not as isolated individuals but as a species bound together with the living world in the Anthropocene. The novel integrates science and activism to emphasize the intertwined existence of individual beings among the larger web of life on Earth. Through the perspective of Thoreau, Powers (2018) writes, "Old trees . . . are our parents, and our parents' parents, perchance. If you would learn the secrets of nature, you must practice more humanity" (p. 11). He has extended the interwoven time spans of his characters to touch the long lives of trees. This creates a narrative world that includes trees and encourages his readers to grapple with the planet.

II. Literature Review

The Overstory has gained considerable importance in the fields of Posthumanism, Environmental Humanities, and Ecocriticism. Morio and Mirbahar (2026), drawing on Garrard's (2011) concepts of dwelling, apocalypse, wilderness, and nonhuman agency, argue that Powers successfully elevates the nonhuman to the status of a moral agent. Their research further suggests that the novel promotes an eco-centric balance between humans and nature.

Seymour (2021) approaches the novel through the lens of climate justice, where activism is seen as an ethical response to ecological crisis. The radical actions of the characters, including tree-sitting demonstrations and self-sacrifice, can be interpreted as efforts to reconcile their moral consciousness with the urgent need to respond to the ecological crisis. Simultaneously, he also highlights the emotional labour involved in bearing witness to extinction.

Oppermann (2022) sees *The Overstory* as an instance of planetary storytelling, in which narrative transforms scientific and environmental-ethical concepts into a lived, song-like experience. She highlights the novel's polyphonic form and reveals how it links human lives, trees, and all living beings as active participants in the process of meaning-making. By bringing together tree time and human time, Powers creates an eco-cosmic parable that challenges readers to move beyond human-centred viewpoints. He also suggests that the novel expands human imagination by foregrounding forests' transformative power, where entangled space and time produce an apocalyptic experience beyond human limits.

More recent criticism situates *The Overstory* within broader debates about narrative structure and ecological theory. Caracciolo (2021) argues that contemporary ecological narratives challenge anthropocentric perspectives by representing the interconnected 'mesh' of human and nonhuman existence. Through a nonlinear narrative structure and ecological entanglements, *The Overstory* fits within broader debates about narrative structure and ecological theory.

III. Methodology

In this study, the methodology primarily relies on qualitative methods, including **close textual analysis** and **thematic interpretation**. However, to make these methods more concrete, this study employs the following approaches:

1. Close Textual Analysis:
   This research analyzes selective passages from *The Overstory*, focusing on particular events in which the author imagines trees as sentient, communicative structures, particularly those involving the 'Wood Wide Web.' These fragments are examined to determine how Powers distributes agency beyond the human and reimagines ecological interdependence. Through his choice of words, images, and the overall structure of the depiction, he quietly dismantles the assumption that only humans think, feel, and matter.
2. Thematic Interpretation:
   The novel is also read thematically, navigating how ideas of eco-cosmopolitanism and ecological empathy surface across its many storylines. Through the lens of posthumanism and Anthropocene theory, the novel invites readers to see themselves reflected in characters like Patricia Westerford and Nicholas Hoel, people whose lives become quietly inseparable from the forests around them. By drawing on both scientific knowledge, such as tree communication, and ethical reflection, such as human responsibility towards nature, Powers builds a narrative that reimagines humanity's place in the ecological world.

This paper analyzes *The Overstory* from the perspectives of posthumanism, Anthropocene theory, and eco-wisdom, focusing on the novel's indictments of anthropocentrism alongside its notions of planetary ethics and ecological mindfulness. As Haraway (2016) and Braidotti (2013) illustrate, posthumanism rejects anthropocentrism and recognizes that human and nonhuman communities, along with the biosphere, shape their common ethics and narratives. *The Overstory* considers trees, fungi, and forests as beings with their own timeliness and agency, synonymous with that of a human being. This depicts a posthuman perspective that moves away from a human-centred perspective and, as a result, cultivates ethical and narrative meaning among the species, disrupting the anthropocentric worldview of human supremacy.

Chakrabarty (2021) and Morton (2013) describe the Anthropocene as an active force shaping the planet's transformation. *The Overstory* brings this entanglement of time and space to life through the interwoven lives of its human characters and the clear contrast between fleeting human existences and the long-lived trees. Powers highlights the need to recognize the unity of the biosphere rather than human domination, drawing attention to how deeply species and natural

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systems are interconnected. In this way, the woods in the novel foreground the ethical and existential consequences of human actions for the health of the planet.

Eco-wisdom, posthumanism and Anthropocene theory invite ethical intellectual engagement with the nonhuman world, leading to empathy, mutuality, and sustainable relations (Oppermann, 2022; Kimmerer, 2013). The novel's branching narrative formally enacts the interrelation between ecosystems and humans, proposing ethically informed human actions in the Anthropocene. Combined, these theoretical frameworks elevate *The Overstory* beyond a simple 'tree story' into a posthuman, ethical, and ecological novel that redefines notions of human agency, responsibility, and identity.

First, this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive lens through which *The Overstory* functions as both a literary and a moral intervention, one that imagines how literature can help cultivate planetary consciousness and eco-wisdom in the face of the climate crisis. Second, eco-wisdom as conceptualized in this paper, does not imply a nostalgic return to nature; rather, it articulates a relational ethics grounded in ecological interdependence. Drawing on Kimmerer's (2013) concept of reciprocal ecology and Oppermann's (2022) notion of planetary storytelling, eco-wisdom situates people within a biotic web of more-than-human entities. Such a framework aligns with posthuman ethics of distributed agency across species and Anthropocene thinking about collective planetary responsibility.

IV. Results and Discussion

A. Trees as Posthuman Entities

Richard Powers's *The Overstory* describes trees as living, sentient beings. This challenges anthropocentric views that restrict meaning and sense-making to the human mind. Powers (2018) states that "trees have been attempting to communicate with humans for a long time, yet they do so at a frequency too low for most people to perceive" (p. 404). In Powers's view, trees remember, have a personality, and evolve, producing a narrative that approaches posthuman ecology, in which agency is distributed across species. Westerford's work, which estranges her within academia, draws attention to the idea of humans depending on nonhuman intelligence. Powers (2018) claims that "everything in the forest is the forest" (p. 112), which demonstrates the interconnectedness and interdependence of beings, and encourages people to see that we, too, are part of a greater whole. Westerford, too, calls the forest a kind of language and thus, a kind of democracy; this perspective of the forest as a democratic system of being subverts anthropocentric hierarchies.

Simard's (2021) exploration of mycorrhizal networks places a powerful scientific framework on this understanding of forest intelligence. Davies (2025) describes the forest as not a collection of trees. Instead, it is a profoundly interdependent community of trees, a finding Powers translates into narrative form with a remarkable fidelity to ecological reality.

The relationship between Nicholas Hoel and the chestnut tree illustrates the bond between two beings that span multiple generations and species. The chestnut tree fulfils multiple functions; it is an ancestor, an archive, and a record. It shows the impact people have on the world that is handed down to them. When Hoel envisions his future descendants, "one day, my children will shake the trunks and be free to eat..." (Powers, 2018, p. 12), he is not dreaming of an abundant World. He is making a time-bound promise, aligning with Braidotti's (2013) concept of zoe-centred egalitarianism, which holds that value extends beyond the human species. A human life flickers briefly compared to the lifespan of a chestnut tree. Powers uses this contrast to challenge the notion that meaningful time is relative only to the human species. *The Overstory* creates a new way of thinking about human-nonhuman species interaction. Through metaphor and narrative that create consciousness of trees, Powers encourages the reader to think about the environment in a new, ethical, and cultural way. The text transforms literature into a post-human ecosystem, a tale that serves as a medium of ecological cognition.

Powers's novel suggests that trees are not merely symbols of endurance and beauty but also agents of change, whose silence reveals the foolishness and destructiveness of human actions. In other words, it is an alternative to the industrial and extractive logics that see trees merely as resources, rather than as living communities. Powers urges a moral and ontological shift in how we see the world. The profound transformation described above resonates with Latour's (2004) notion of political ecology, in which nature is no longer an external object but an actor in collective affairs. Nevertheless, *The Overstory* signals a 'posthuman' turn for the environmental humanities, dismantling anthropocentric systems of knowing to see trees as agents of history and meaning. By merging scientific realism with a certain mythic reverence, Powers envisions trees as conscious, agentive, and morally significant beings and further reconfigures the novel's form to re-orient our ecological imagination.

However, it is worth acknowledging that some critics have questioned whether Powers's representation of trees risks romanticising nonhuman agency, potentially oversimplifying the complex and often indifferent processes of ecological systems. Such critiques remind us that posthuman ethics must be grounded not only in empathy but also in scientific rigour and critical self-awareness. Powers himself navigates this tension carefully, grounding his arboreal imagination in the real science of mycorrhizal networks and forest communication rather than pure metaphor.

B. Anthropocene and Temporal Consciousness Ethics

The Overstory embodies philosophical and ethical dimensions of the Anthropocene, a term coined by Crutzen (2002) to describe an epoch in which human life begins to shape geological processes. The Anthropocene concept suggests a paradoxical dimension to human progress. The advancement of technology has not only improved human life but also polluted the environment and destabilized Earth's fragile balance. The story of people and trees explores humans' right to existence in a world dominated by industrialization and climate change. The merging of deep ecological time on long

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timescales resembles Chakrabarty's (2009) argument that the Anthropocene blurs the distinction between natural and human history.

The novel also contrasts the long life of trees with the short life of humans, thereby portraying the moral implications of consumption and environmental degradation. Human systems tend to be immediate and extractive, whereas trees exemplify slow, regenerative ecological systems. Therefore, Powers invites readers to view the world ecologically, from a perspective that is no longer human-centred but that recognises ecological continuity and a temporal dimension. In this way, climate awareness arises from a humility toward the timescales of natural processes. The novel offers glimpses into transformations in humans that emerge from an awareness of reliance on the global biosphere. Characters such as Olivia Vandergriff and Adam Appich undergo profound changes in perception. Olivia's near-death experience does not return her to ordinary life, but opens her to something larger. She does not use rational thinking to undergo this transformation. Instead, she draws on the natural world's rhythms and patience to navigate her journey. As Powers (2018) describes, this integration with the natural world dissolves destructive boundaries: "You cannot see the forest without thinking of the trees; you cannot see the trees without thinking of yourself. You see everything, myself in it all" (p. 205). This passage demonstrates how one begins to see the self within everything, erasing the separation between observer and environment.

Building on this, in the Anthropocene, it is necessary to be aware of the interactions between human decisions and ecological, social, and economic systems. Adam attempts to answer these questions as a scholar, and his scepticism toward modern culture aligns with a naturally progressive ecological outlook. This mirrors the novel's own distrust of modernity, expressed more gently but with equal stubbornness. The living forest thus emerges as a protest site, a space for critical inquiry and ethical reflection on the Anthropocene. While the novel addresses numerous detrimental aspects of the human relationship with nature, one particularly significant issue is time dissonance, arising from human impatience versus the slow, measured pace of trees. Powers (2018) captures this tension powerfully: "The trees cannot forget what man forgets" (p. 208). Morton's (2013) concept of the hyperobject is applicable here, as Powers uses the forest as a vast, dominant presence that compels readers to think and act at scales far beyond ordinary human perception. *The Overstory* places interconnectedness at the heart of life, in direct opposition to individualism. Bennett's (2010) "vibrant materialism," which proposes that agency is not exclusive to humans, Powers crafts trees that are more than passive symbols; they are active participants in the unfolding of life. The novel ultimately invites readers, through narrative empathy, to think beyond their own perspectives and inhabit the experiences and feelings of all living things.

In doing so, it challenges the industrial logic that has driven environmental degradation for centuries and calls for a deeper, more planetary sense of human purpose. At the same time, the novel critiques the Anthropocene and explores possibilities of collective survival. As Haraway (2016) suggests, the novel envisions an ethical framework that moves beyond human-centred thinking to include more-than-human worlds. In this way, *The Overstory* becomes both a diagnosis of the present and an imaginative vision of posthuman, eco-ethical coexistence.

C. Environmental Understanding and Social Survival

In Powers's narrative, the forest contains more than the beauty of a natural setting. The forest symbolizes memory, wisdom, and gentle strength. The forest's presence critiques the Enlightenment, which prefers abstract reason over the relational, embodied knowledge it represents. The changing perception of the forest combines ecological philosophies and contemporary posthuman thought and represents a more relational way of living to survive than a hierarchical way. Powers encourages the reader to experience what Garrard (2011) names the 'ecological imagination' and have a more intimate and ethical connection to the world. *The Overstory* is not just a book about the importance of trees but also an invitation for the literary world to connect with the world of nature, where we belong. Patricia's solitary searches, Ray and Dorothy's tree-mediated rekindling, and Neelay's virtual existence do not represent a disconnection but form an interconnected narrative, like a forest. Powers builds a story about interdependent human and nonhuman lives.

Powers's characters discover and enact a 'parliament of things' (Latour, 2004) where genuine conversation about how to co-exist is possible, and humans and nonhumans are not separated by category. The eco-wisdom that emerges from this conversation is not mystical or abstract. It requires the patience present in slow, humble living. The trees in this novel offer no lectures and demonstrate instead. Powers (2018) argues that "the world must first be heard and then acted upon" (p. 250). The suggested way to live more honestly, as this novel suggests, is to learn to listen to the slow accumulation of ecological time and the forest. The reciprocity that Kimmerer (2013) describes is through acknowledging and genuinely relating to the Earth through care and mutuality rather than extraction.

Powers hints that the deepening of humanity's perceptual crisis is as important to consider as the environmental crisis. Powers suggests that storytelling itself might be the remedy for this collective forgetting. When Nicholas Hoel listens to the chestnut, not merely observing it but genuinely hearing it, the novel offers one of its most moving moments: "The chestnut remembers, and we remember with it" (Powers, 2018, p. 142). Powers reminds us of the voice we lost beneath the relentless wave of modern progress. *The Overstory* reaches toward what Powers (2018) calls the "oldest wisdom on earth" (p. 360). Humanity's survival, the novel insists, is inextricably linked to the health of the natural world. And as seeds disperse across continents in the novel's closing pages, Powers offers something rare in ecological fiction, genuine, unforced hope. Wherever a living thread between one organism and the biosphere is restored, something begins again.

D. Narrative as Global and Ethical Intervention

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Powers's *The Overstory* is fascinating as it does not simply tell a story about nature; it brings the reader into the story. The novel portrays how the structure of a forest has layers, similar to the structure of the novel, and extends in numerous directions with connections that may not be visible at first, but are nonetheless present. Traditional novels usually have stories that are told in a straight line. A story that extends in multiple directions and delves deeper than the visible is an analogy for roots and branches. Having this structure conveys that being ecologically conscious is not merely talking, but rather a way of being that invites the audience to be conscious and embrace nature.

Powers deliberately disrupts his narrative structure, moving away from the straightforward, linear storytelling that the novel itself subtly critiques. By weaving through different times, voices, and species, the novel challenges readers to rethink what a story is and who it truly belongs to. This idea aligns with what Iovino and Oppermann (2012) describe as a "material narrativity," in which trees, soil, seeds, and underground fungi are not merely background elements but active participants shaping the unfolding story. When Powers shifts from a human-centred narrative to one that genuinely embraces multiple species, he is not simply making a stylistic choice; he is making an ethical statement, encouraging readers to experience the narrative as a forest experiences time: collectively, patiently, and without a single dominant perspective.

This understanding of narrative as a more-than-human practice finds strong theoretical support in the work of Celermajer and Otjen (2024), who argue that the stories we tell either open space for nonhuman beings or quietly close it. Narrative, in their view, is never neutral; it either grants other species a place in the moral world or denies them one. Powers's novel takes precisely the path Celermajer and Otjen advocate: it does not position the human as the sole subject of the story but allows the forest, the chestnut, the mycorrhizal network, and the ancient redwood to carry their own weight. The intertextual and historical allusions in the novel also foster what Buell (1995) calls the environmental imagination, a literary perspective that mirrors and informs our ecological thinking. The novel also develops an ethical outlook that is humble and responsible, reminding us that humanity is only one species in the vast ecological landscape.

Further, Powers employs ethical reflection through changes in the voice. The story exemplifies a form of posthuman narrative ethics, in which narration is less an instrument than a space of habitation. Powers democratises the narrative by decentring human characters in favour of trees and ecosystems, so that human centrality in the traditional novel gives way to the claims of trees and forests. *The Overstory* thus transforms the novel into an eco-cosmopolitan narrative, connecting local environmental problems with global environmental consciousness. The connectivity Powers draws attention to transcend territorial and species differences, and encourages a sense of world citizenship. Through the narrative, he seeks to train the reader to think relationally, as any violence done to another being can affect larger ecosystems.

Finally, *The Overstory* can be read as an example of how literature might foster ecological consciousness, cultivate sensitivity, and rebuild empathy amid environmental alienation. The narrative style through which Powers portrays the Anthropocene does not merely make readers feel as though they are in the Anthropocene; it offers them an embodied experience, allowing them to feel the vibrations of the nonhuman world. Reading the novel, in this sense, becomes an ecological healing process.

V. Conclusion

The Overstory by Richard Powers offers a revolutionary reimagining of human-nature relations in the Anthropocene, granting trees narrative agency and revealing the deep structures of ecological interdependence. It challenges anthropocentric frameworks grounded in the logic of the Industrial Revolution. This paper illustrates how Powers reshapes wisdom through posthuman ethics and complex narrative, constructing eco-wisdom as a form of collective planetary consciousness. The novel values relational existence, a view consistent with the work of Haraway (2016), Braidotti (2013), and Chakrabarty (2021), who advocate distributed agency across living and non-living beings. Powers's novel provides an ethical response to the ecological crisis, suggesting that survival must be a collective endeavour rather than an individual struggle. Finally, *The Overstory* demonstrates that climate consciousness can be sparked by re-enacting the connections between readers, trees, ecosystems, and the wider world. The novel, which brings art, science, and ethics into dialogue, offers a renewed opportunity to embrace multi-species coexistence and affirms that narrative art is one of humanity's most powerful resources for planetary survival. In this way, *The Overstory* not only represents an ecological crisis; it participates in the work of environmental and intergenerational justice, inviting readers to take responsibility for the ways human actions shape the conditions of life for more-than-human others and for future generations. *The Overstory* reminds readers that the ecological crisis cannot be solved with the same destructive mindset that created it. Instead, the novel calls for humility, connection, and shared responsibility with the natural world. As a posthuman narrative, it is itself an act of caring literature. It asks us to move beyond simply observing nature and to genuinely feel our place within it, alongside all living beings in the Anthropocene.

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