"Environmental Ethics in 21st-Century Climate Fiction: The Case of Richard Powers' The Overstory"

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Abstract

The Overstory (2018) by Richard Powers is a notable example of climate fiction in the 21st century, and this paper will specifically discuss how environmental ethics are incorporated into the theme and narrative of this particular novel. The research problem concerns the fact that the current body of literature tends to separate thematic or structural analysis and scarcely attempts to reconcile Ecocriticism and ecological ethics with the views of the Anthropocene within a rational framework of logic. This is intended to demonstrate how Powers incorporates storytelling art and environmental stewardship to challenge anthropocentrism and foster environmental awareness. The research question is as follows: How does The Overstory employ narrative strategies to introduce environmental ethics in the 21st century? This has been achieved through a qualitative theory-based study that employs close reading. The study is based on Ecocriticism, ethics, and anthropocenosis theories. It has been established that The Overstory appeals to polyphonic oral representations of the story, visual representations of the arboreal symbols, and the periods of the planet to revisit the relationships of human nature with nature as mutually dependent and moral obligations. The research paper proposes applying this approach to all forms of climate fiction, utilizing this genre of literature to foster eco-consciousness in society.

Keywords: *The Overstory, climate fiction, environmental ethics, Ecocriticism, Anthropocene*

"الأخلاقيات البيئية في أدب المناخ المعاصر: دراسة لرواية القصة الفوقية لريتشارد باورز"

الملخص

تُعَدُّ رواية **القصة الفوقية** (2018) لريتشارد باورز مثالًا بارزًا على أدب المناخ في القرن الحادي والعشرين، وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى مناقشة الكيفية التي تُدمَج بها الأخلاقيات البيئية في موضوع هذه الرواية وبنيتها السردية. وتتمثل مشكلة البحث في أن معظم الدراسات الحالية تميل إلى الفصل بين التحليل الموضوعاتي أو البنيوي، ونادرًا ما تحاول التوفيق بين النقد البيئي والأخلاقيات البيئية ورؤى عصر الأنثروبوسين ضمن إطار منطقي عقلاني. ويسعى هذا البحث إلى توضيح كيفية توظيف باورز لفن السرد ومفهوم الوصاية البيئية من أجل تحدي النزعة المركزية للإنسان وتعزيز الوعي البيئي.

وينطلق البحث من السؤال الآتي: كيف توظف رواية **القصة الفوقية** استراتيجيات السرد لتقديم الأخلاقيات البيئية في القرن الحادي والعشرين؟ وقد أُنجزت هذه الدراسة من خلال منهج نوعي قائم على التحليل النظري باستخدام القراءة الدقيقة للنص. وتعتمد الدراسة على مقاربات النقد البيئي، والأخلاقيات البيئية، ونظريات الأنثروبوسين.

وقد أظهرت الدراسة أن رواية **القصة الفوقية** تعتمد على تمثيلات سردية متعددة الأصوات، وصور بصرية لرموز الأشجار، إضافة إلى استحضار الأزمنة الكوكبية، من أجل إعادة النظر في علاقة الإنسان بالطبيعة بوصفها علاقة اعتماد متبادل والتزامًا أخلاقيًا. ويقترح البحث توظيف هذا المنهج في دراسة مختلف أشكال أدب المناخ، والاستفادة من هذا الجنس الأدبي في تعزيز الوعي البيئي داخل المجتمع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القصة الفوقية، أدب المناخ، الأخلاقيات البيئية، النقد البيئي، الأنثروبوسين.

1. Introduction

Within the context of twenty-first-century realities, climate change has become one of the most pressing global issues (Durbeck, 2022), redefining the political landscape, social agenda, and the work of culture. Literature, and specifically climate fiction, has evolved as a vital art form in responding to the ecological issues of our contemporary era, offering speculative stories that aim to explain, challenge, and perhaps revolutionize human interaction with the environment (Hatzisvvidou, 2024; Lahtinen, 2024; Farhan, 2025-April). The novel's thematic abundance, complexity, and moral urgency make it an excellent case study for examining the question of environmental ethics in twenty-first-century climate fiction (Archer, 2024; Day, 2022; Farhan, 2025-September). The depiction of arboreal life by Powers critiques anthropocentric perceptions of the world and advocates for ecological responsibility (Holingshead, 2024; Apriyanto and Farhan, 2025). Through the lens of material Ecocriticism, the text de-centres the human subject and grants agency to non-human living forms.

There are three core themes in the title of the current study. The first to be discussed is environmental ethics, the philosophical and moral criteria that introduce human responsibility for the natural world (Piccolo, 2022). The second, climate fiction in the twenty-first century, locates the work within the genre that attempts to confront the environmental issues of the Anthropocene through narrative imagination (Wardrope, 2024). The third and final case study, *The Overstory*, focuses the discussion on a single text, which effectively represents these concerns in a sophisticated manner (Heise, 2022).

Although critical attention to *The Overstory* has grown following its publication, recent research tends to adopt general ecocritical models without considering the intellectual rigor of environmental ethics in their analyses. Nonetheless, little is explored about how the narrative strategies of Powers operate to materialize particular ethical theories, such as deep ecology or the land ethic (Reddick & Caracciolo, 2022; Wardrope, 2024).

This paper examines how *The Overstory* contributes to the development, expression, and support of environmental ethics through an analysis of the novel's narrative structure, character development, and the effective use of imagery and symbolism. The research question guiding this study is: How does *The Overstory*, as an exemplar of twenty-first-century climate fiction, articulate and construct environmental ethics through its narrative techniques and thematic representations?

To sum it up, The *Overstory* is an ecological ecosystem of stories. The novel, which mixes narratives of non-human and human life, invites the reader to reconsider his or her place in the greater life web and to de-centre the dominant position of the human-related narratives, and to champion an ecologically sensitive perception of the moral world. The text interpreted through the prism of Ecocriticism, environmental ethics, and the Anthropocene theory will contribute to the formation of a more multifaceted vision of how modern literature may be regarded as an echo of the current ecological crises and their response.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

The proposed study presents a triangulated theoretical framework comprising Ecocriticism, Environmental Ethics Theory, and Anthropocene discourse. The combination enables the analysis to flow freely across textual embodiment, to moral philosophy, and

ultimately to the major planetary environment, which determines and is in turn determined by literature.

1.1.1. Ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism, as the primary literary-critical focus, considers the exposure to the more-than-human world in texts and the origins of narrative innovation in creating and developing ecological consciousness. In *The Overstory*, trees no longer form a beautiful backdrop that draws the reader to a level of anthropocentric, visceral attention; instead, they play a role as participants in the world of the story, shifting the attention toward a biocentric level. Ali (2024) interprets *The Overstory* as an extended critique of anthropocentrism and envisions its storyboard of stewardship as a reconstitution of tree-based lifeworlds into a narrative ethic. Bhusal (2024) demonstrates how the symbols of architecture (roots, branches, canopy) included in the novel function as an embedded pedagogy, welcoming ethical responsiveness to interdependence. In sum, these contributions help advance a close reading approach to attention to form (polyphony, networked plots), figure (arboreal symbolism), and address (the novel as an ethical appeal to the reader), in combination constituting a co-production of ecological knowledge (Ali, 2024; Bhusal, 2024; Schliephake, 2022).

1.1.2. Environmental Theory of Ethics.

Hourdequin (2021) surveys the state of environmental ethics, demonstrating that the discussion remains divided along the lines of intrinsic value, moral considerability, and pragmatic orientation themes, which are directly reflected in the novel's portrayal of human-nonhuman relations. Wardrope (2024) rearticulates the land ethic in an Anthropocene bioethics by emphasizing the holistic and diachronic membership of a biotic community; this helps break down plots in *The Overstory* into ethical conversion events of membership and instrumentalism. In their way, Piccolo (2022) conceptualizes the notion of intrinsic values in conservation, aligning with the novel insistence on awareness of non-human value that extends beyond what is useful. Read through these lenses, *The Overstory* dramatizes ethical deliberation in narrative prose, refiguring agency, harm, and care inter- and interspecifically (Hourdequin, 2021; Wardrope, 2024; Piccolo, 2022).

1.1.3. Anthropocene Discourse.

Finally, the analysis situates *The Overstory* within the discursive horizon of the Anthropocen. Durbeck (2022) also highlights the Anthropocene as a methodological problem for literary studies as a whole, requiring methods to be found in inter- and trans-disciplining, as well as multidisciplining, which is precisely the integrative mindset of this approach. It would be shown that literary templates mediate the ethical interpretation of the Anthropocene by the scientists, in a process of two-way traffic, as is the case in *The Overstory*, which narrativises ecological systems and thresholds (Reddick, 2022). As a continuation of this view, the 2024 forum of the Novel journal, What Does Reading Do in the Anthropocene? Highlights that narrative forms may have the effect of drawing attention, eliciting an emotional response, and influencing the reader's ethical stance in the face of ecological crisis. This literature suggests that *The Overstory* by Powers can only be viewed as a cultural artefact with its share of environmental concerns, but as an ethical instrument that can help readers to become responsible towards the planet in the long term and on a system-wide level (Durbeck, 2022; Reddick, 2022; Holinshead, 2024).

The framework thus operates in three interconnected planes: the ecocritical close reading of form and figure; the ethical

explanation of values, considerability, and obligations; and the Anthropocene-scale positioning of risk, responsibility, and time. Practically, the analysis shall follow where *The Overstory* can (i) extend narrative salience and a quasi-agency that *The Overstory* accords non-human life, (ii) dramatize the conversion of ethics toward the ideal of land-community that is in line with deep ecological ideas, and (iii) localize the actions symbolic of long-duration outcomes (representative of Anthropocene conditions). In aligning such planes, the paper explains how climate fiction can perform, at once, as art, argument, and cultural intervention.

2. Literature Review

Over the last few years, *The Overstory* has received an increasing amount of scholarly interest across several critical paradigms. This review of the literature divides the present research into three interrelated subsections: Ecocriticism, Environmental Ethics, and Anthropocene Discourse. All subsections review the corresponding academic contributions, highlighting thematic trends and methodology, and will culminate in a synthesis of the research gap, thus leading to the current study.

2.1 Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism has become the most common approach to understanding *The Overstory*, and researchers emphasize how Powers accords agency to non-human living beings and creates symbolic structures that prompt ecological consciousness. According to Ali (2024), the novel can be viewed as a prolonged challenge to anthropocentrism, where arboreal life is used to represent environmental management. According to Bhusal (2024), the metaphorical use of roots, branches, and canopy proves to be a valuable teaching tool in promoting ecological interdependence. The author Atvara (2022) situates this story within mythological contexts, such as Gaia, where spiritualized ecological symbols enhance environmental awareness.

Other studies from different critical angles further support this approach. Day (2022) applies biosemiotics to the novel to discuss the ontology of trees as communicative and symbolic entities in action. Tanveer (2022) employs eco-symbolism to highlight the interrelatedness between the non-human and human worlds. In his profile on Ecocriticism, Schliephake (2022) explains how it has grown to encompass ancient and modern environmental imaginaries, thereby framing non-human agency as central to contemporary eco-literary criticism. These works, taken together, confirm *The Overstory* as one of the foundations of ecocritical fiction in the 21st century.

2.2 Environmental Ethics

While Ecocriticism prevails, it can be observed that a distinct group of works interprets *The Overstory* in terms of the concept of environmental ethics, specifically the philosophical constructs of Deep Ecology and the Land Ethic. Wardrope (2024) reinterpreted Leopold's land ethic in terms of the Anthropocene and the novel's characters, emphasizing the ethical conversion required for participation in the ecological community. Hourdequin (2021) provides an overview of recent developments in environmental ethics, specifically regarding discussions of intrinsic value, which align with Powers' definition of trees as ends in themselves. Piccolo (2022) satisfies the demand of the novel since it does not neglect non-human values besides utility by operationalizing the inherent values of conservation. The works that accompany the work deal with the ethical concerns of the language and the story in the novel. Clarke (2022) employs an eco-linguistic approach, revealing how the application of metaphor and

discourse in *The Overstory* facilitates environmental responsibility. In their analysis, Prabha Sam & Rathna (2025) consider the text an ethical manifesto, which promotes safe and sound practices. De Riso (2025) also associates the work of Powers with posthumanist ethics by proposing the idea that the novel erases the distinctions between species, as ecological equality takes their place. Combined, they have a strong, yet in many cases, incomplete ethical-philosophical foundation and fail to integrate ethical analysis with the formal plotting of the novel.

2.3 Anthropocene Discourse

One more critical thread situates *The Overstory* within the Anthropocene, the proposed epoch of human domination of the planet. Skold (2023) utilizes the novel as a cultural model for addressing the climate crisis without inertia, where narrative activism is seen as playing an essential role. Anthropocene, as a new didactic weapon, turns out to be an ecologically sophisticated and empathetic novel, according to Colacel (2024). The Novel journal forum (2024) discusses what reading accomplishes when read in contexts of crisis, and it points to the structuring of ethical position as well as emotional connection through narrative.

According to Durbeck (2022), inter- and multidisciplinary approaches to literature in the Anthropocene are one of the prevailing positions on the subject, and Reddick (2022) investigates how scientists utilize literary templates to construct ethical representations. Other scholarship places the novel in conversation with planetary fictions. For example, Archer (2023) contrasts *The Overstory* with South Asian cli-fi in the context of the globalization of environmental justice, and Caralero (2023) approaches its multi-scale, multi-temporal form as a narrative strategy suitable for the conditions of the Anthropocene. These publications validate the topicality of the novel in the world's ecological discourse, yet rarely relate this ecocritical and ethical cosmology to the broader ecocritical and moral discourse.

2.4 Research Gap

Among these three fields, the established literature demonstrates that *The Overstory* can trigger ecocritical readings, ethical discourse, and contextualization within the context of the Anthropocene. Nevertheless, studies are mostly confined to the scope of one theory; thus, their explanations are limited. Even fewer texts combine the textual sensitivity of Ecocriticism, the moral clarity of environmental ethics, with the planetary scope of Anthropocene discourse, into a single, continuous reading. This breach is especially apparent concerning the lack of studies in connecting the narrative motif of the novel, its polyphonic nature of characters' arcs, symbolic stratifications, and the changes in time to particular ethical systems. This study is presented in this paper through a triangulated research strategy that integrates all three approaches, providing a comprehensive investigation of the construction of environmental ethics in the climate fiction environment of the 21st century.

3. Methodology

The research design employed in this study is a qualitative interpretivist approach that assesses the construction of ethics toward the environment in *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. The thematic content analysis, supplemented by the analysis of narrative form, symbolism, and philosophical underpinnings of the novel. By supplementing Ecocriticism, the theory of environmental ethics, and the concept of the Anthropocene, the study will attempt to connect the micro-analysis of the text with macro-environmental issues.

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative design based on literary analysis. Qualitative methods have

gained significant support in the field of literary and cultural studies, given their ability to expose a text to a range of meanings (Given, 2020; Tracy, 2020). According to Creswell and Poth (2023), qualitative designs are particularly effective when the intended outcome is to explore how meaning is created within the context of narrative form and symbolic structure, which is precisely what the current study aims to achieve.

3.2 Rationale for Text Selection

There were three interrelated reasons to select *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers as the case study. On the one hand, it has been described as one of the landmarks of 21st-century climate fiction, having received the Pulitzer Prize and roused consistent scholarly interest in the field of environmental humanities (Archer, 2023; Colacel, 2024). Second, the polyphonic structure of the novel, where human and non-human narratives overlap, also preconditions an effective research area in environmental ethics at work (Ali, 2024; Bhusal, 2024). Third, according to Nuri (2020), the concept of non-human agency and the interdependency of humans and nature prompts a more ecocritical approach. Therefore, an ecocritical study of such texts should be pivotal in furthering the discourse on Ecocriticism in literature in general, and *The Overstory* is the perfect text to challenge theoretical combinations.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The study is grounded in a holistic theoretical framework and incorporates elements of Ecocriticism, Environmental Ethics, and Anthropocene Discourse. The methodology that the researcher implements in this triangulation will be the methodological guidelines used by Heise (2020) and Hawkins (2020),. The first, Ecocriticism, provides an opportunity to read the text as a close-up on the environment (Glotfelty and Fromm, 2020), the second, Environmental Ethics Theory, gives a philosophical paradigm to analyze the moral positions of the text (Hourdequin, 2021), and the third, the concept of the Anthropocene Discourse, puts the text into the context of the global environmental crisis (Durbeck, 2022).

3.4 Analytical Procedures

The analysis unfolds in five structured stages.

3.4.1. Text Familiarisation: Read The Overstory carefully and take notes to discover where areas represent ecological affiliations and ethical quandaries, and non-human agency. It coincides with the idea expressed by Roussel (2021), who mentions the necessity of immersion into the text as the basis of interpretive validity.

3.4.2. Coding and Categorization: According to these three theoretical lenses, the passages picked out are thematically coded. A step is oriented with the help of a reflexive thematic analysis, as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2021), which makes the step transient and reproducible (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

3.4.3. Thematic Analysis: This involves finding the patterns of narrative expression of environmental ethics, which consists of using the symbolic, structural, and character-driven themes of the novel.

3.4.4. Interpretive Synthesis: The synthesis of findings with the knowledge gained in the academic literature that would allow relating textual analysis to philosophical and environmental frameworks.

3.4.5. Comparative Contextualization: Following Pain & Cahill's (2022) call for comparative eco-literary analysis, this work situates the novel within broader genre trends by referencing other works of climate fiction, such as Barbara Kingsolver's Flight Behavior and Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist (not The Gun Island, which is not a climate fiction work).

4. Analysis

Analysis in literary studies lies between the surface reading of a text and the theory upon which one reads it. Operating within three interrelated critical orientations, Ecocriticism, Environmental Ethics, and Anthropocene Discourse in this section, this paper analyzes *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. Both lenses offer different interpretive options to explain how the novel revises human-nonhuman relations, disrupts anthropocentric thinking, and serves as an example of narrative activism in response to environmental crises of the 21st century. In these readings, detailed textual interpretation is always accompanied by theoretical approaches and current studies, so that every observation rests not only on the language of the novel but also on the academic discourse within which it is embedded.

4.1 Ecocriticism in *The Overstory*

Ecocriticism represents an approach to reading literature in which the connection between the human and non-human worlds comes to the foreground, abolishing anthropocentric outlooks and putting the focus on ecological interrelatedness. Richard Powers, in *The Overstory,* broadens the concept of character and agency to include a living tree as the leading narrative actor. The use of vivid descriptions, symbolic figurations, and narration creates a dialogue that prompts the reader to rethink their ethical and existential connection with nature, implying that non-human life is not an actor but a participant in the same narrative of the planet. This ethical repositioning becomes particularly vivid in Powers's textual moments where trees are granted voice and moral urgency; *"The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help"* (p. 312). In this case, the narrator extends the scientific time dimension of evolution to a rather immediate deployment of morality, as trees, creations of deep time, require human aid. By using the term' wondrous products', the author attributes more than a utilitarian value, and by calling on the words of 'help', the relationship is not one of exploitation but a mutual exchange of benefits. At the ecocritical level, this text challenges the hierarchy between the human and non-human worlds by portraying non-human life forms as deserving empathy and moral consideration.

The novel further deepens this ecocritical stance by attributing knowledge and memory directly to trees, expanding their role as agents of meaning: *"Trees know things. They remember everything"* (p. 141). This personification of trees disputes Cartesian divisions of mind and matter. One of the most severe problems of ecocritical theory is the use of trees as agents and subjects, attributing to them the qualities of memory and the knowledge. This movement is representative of material Ecocriticism, wherein the agent of matter is focused upon since the trees are not deprived objects but living beings. Finally, Powers exaggerates the power and communication of the forest, despite the destruction, and reinforces the non-human agency of ecocritical assertion; *"The crowns shatter in the wind, the trunks twist, the bark splits open... And still, the forest keeps speaking"* (p. 484). This mixture of destruction and survival presents the forest as a flexible and expressive organism that solidifies its position as an agent, despite the difficulties of humankind and climate. The allegorical talking forest challenges the fact that communication is a specifically human trait, and more recent ecocritical positions have served to show the necessity of introducing multispecies storytelling. The way The Overstory functions remains evident, though, it is that it presents the philosophical presumption of Ecocriticism, placing the humanist view of things into a peripheral position and viewing the ecological

community as a whole in a more holistic light. By personifying trees as intelligent and communicative, Powers aligns with Ali (2024), who reads the novel as a long-term critique of anthropocentrism, and with Bhusal (2024), who interprets the use of “arbour” as arboreal symbolism aimed at promoting ecological consciousness

4.2 Environmental Ethics in the Narrative

Environmental ethics considers the ethics that human beings should apply to their connections with nature, primarily emphasizing the value of non-human life itself. The change of the characters in terms of their personal transformation is theatrical. *Overstory* is the expression of the triumph of nature as the large interrelations of interdependent beings, which are equal to and different to human beings. The narrative is consistent with the ideas of Deep Ecology and the Land Ethic that was developed by Leopold, and which anticipates the interdependence of the living and non-living worlds and the value of these entities. This moral transformation is made explicit in instances where the story expresses some ethical code of how human beings should treat trees; *What you make from a tree should be at least as miraculous as what you cut down"* (p.367). This ethical claim transforms resource extraction into a moral practice, one that is conditioned by reciprocity and reverence. The labelling of the tree as miraculous implies that it is worth more than a commodity, and any human intervention must respect the inherent value of the tree.

Powers further highlights the transformative power of narrative itself, presenting storytelling as a vehicle for ecological ethics. *"The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story"* (p. 488). This highlights narrative as a moral tool, which is also the pedagogical goal of Deep Ecology, to make us identify with the non-human world through emotional association with it. Ultimately, the novel distils its moral vision into a sweeping claim about the value of life on Earth, extending ethical responsibility to the entire biosphere; *"The only thing worth saving is the world"* (p. 502). The statement broadens the concept of "saving" beyond human survival to encompass the biosphere, aligning with the ecocentric moral framework of Deep Ecology.

Those lines rekindle the idea of the Land Ethic, which was coined by Leopold and re-conceptualized by Wardrope (2024) and focuses on the idea that humans are supposed to act as responsible citizens of an ecological community. They are also a solution to the fact that Piccolo (2022) emphasizes that we should take intrinsic value into account when conservation ethics is concerned.

4.3 Anthropocene and Narrative Activism

The Anthropocene, as a critical framework, emphasizes an unprecedented and massive human impact on the Earth's geological and ecological processes, which are often referred to as a planetary boundary crisis. In this light, literature becomes critical, as it serves as narrative activism, attempting to mobilize ethical consciousness through storytelling. One such process is a good example of *the Overstory* by Richard Powers, who not only draws the ecological disaster fictionally but also reconstructs the category of moral responsibility. Reddick and Caracciolo (2022) and Heise (2021) explain that Anthropocene narratives must grapple with deep time and planet-scale dynamics, as well as the susceptibility of various species. Powers makes these imperatives aesthetic modes that render non-human life central to restructuring anthropocentric hierarchies in favour of a transformative re-vision of embodiment as ecological being human, in an excruciatingly

radical restructuring of meaning for humanity itself.

This inversion of perspective is immediately signalled in the novel's opening, where the hierarchy of humans over nature is forcefully destabilized; *"This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees, where humans have just arrived"* (p. 3). In this case, Powers positions the human race as a latecomer to the evolutionary scenario on Earth, a meddling intruder in a world that is already thriving with arboreal life. This viewpoint is similar to the argument proposed by Clarke, who claims that ecological thinking involves decentering the human and its role in understanding the planet's dependence (Clarke, 2022). This ethical decentering culminates in moments where the novel explicitly equates human and non-human destinies: "*What's happening to the trees is happening to us"* (p. 349). The ecological and human destinies are synthesized into a moral equation, revealing mutual vulnerabilities. Archer (2024) introduces a list of narrative types that are capable of making the dramatic components of what has been called slow violence apparent by revealing the unseen connections between the victimization of people and the destruction of nature. Such narrative activism can be characterized that way, as the boundary between humans and non-humans is blurred when drawn by Powers.

The novel ultimately expands its ecological critique from individual acts of conservation to systemic collapse, stressing the planetary scale of the crisis: *"The Earth will become unlivable long before the last tree falls"* (p. 562). This broad statement echoes a catchphrase offered by Heise (2021) on the need for narratives based on solutions to planetary precarity, whereby the mere continuance of humanity hinges on reconsidering human production and consumption systems. The line makes climate fiction prophetic, as it warns of consequences that extend beyond the fate of forests and encompass the entire biosphere.

The Overstory constitutes a new reframing of the contemporary novel as art and intervention through its combination of ecocritical imagery, environmental ethics, and the Anthropocene scale of plot-level narrative activism. All three lenses can be used to unveil how Powers' work disengages the human identity from dominion over nature and redefines it in terms of interdependence, moral reciprocity, and vulnerability. Not only does this holistic method address the lack in past literature that tends to compartmentalize thematic and structural traditions, but it also shows the potential of 21st-century climate fiction to achieve ethical and political investments without compromising the complexity of literature.

4.4 Discussion

According to the findings of this interpretation, *The Overstory* by Richard Powers is a multidimensional story that integrates ecocritical images, environmental ethics, and the Anthropocene narrative. Whereas earlier studies tend to separate thematic components or formal innovations, the current analysis combines them within a clear ethical framework, thereby providing a more comprehensive interpretation.

Ecocritically, the results support the narrative of Ali (2024), highlighting the arboreal protagonists who managed to challenge established anthropocentric paradigms and make trees key players in the planet's history, and this ties into what Bhusal (2024) says: *The Overstory* manages to open up that shift to the more-than-human realm of the natural environment. This study supersedes these interpretations by showing how arboreal agency not only has a thematic presence but also a structural one in the polyphonic narration of the novel, where the stories of trees and

those of human beings are not only intertwined but also cannot be separated. Such structural integration supports the intuitions of Atvara (2022) regarding the mythic dimension of the text, while also situating them within an ethical register that directly addresses the reader in terms of moral responsibility.

Regarding environmental ethics, promoted by Piccolo (2022) through the tenet of appreciating the intrinsically valuable non-human life and Wardrope's (2024) reconsideration of the role of the Land Ethic as a concept initially introduced by Leopold. The instances where the narration posits the utilitarian ethics of the human-tree relationship as a mutual duty reflect the transition from utilitarian ethics to ecocentric ones. It confirms the manner in which the story, per se, as an expression of character, curves, symbols, and rhetorical implores, is utilized as a vehicle of ethical change.

The discourse of the Anthropocene made in the novel helps Heise (2021) in the effort of making literature planetary views. These lines restore humanity as a latecomer in the world of trees, subverting the time and space axis of human exceptionalism. In this case, a direct comparison can be made between the efforts by Reddick and Caracciolo (2022) to recalibrate moral values in response to the ecological crisis and the association of environmental degradation with broader global tendencies of human self-destruction by Powers. However, this paper takes it a step further by putting such planetary awareness into perspective, investigating the sense of narrative as a strategy for enacting environmental issues and potentially influencing the climatic effect of taking action on environmental ethics in the real world.

The past intellectual tradition has been inclined to approach *The Overstory* as follows: the former by Ecocriticism, the latter by environmental ethics, but rarely both at the same moment, at least unless the latter is subjected to the influence of Anthropocene concerns. The given study closes the gap in this matter by demonstrating that it is precisely the combination of these dimensions that provides the novel with its unique power within the landscape of climate fiction in the 21st century.

In direct answer to the research question, How does *The Overstory* employ narrative strategies to embody environmental ethics in the 21st century?. The analysis demonstrates how Powers employs material that interlinks human and non-human stories, the moral redeployment of resources, and planetary time scales to produce a simultaneously aesthetic, ethical, and political experience in literature. These are strategies that do not exist independently but in harmony with one another; thus, the novel serves as the reference point in the literature of contemporary environmentalism.

The Overstory by Powers can be seen as a paradigmatic example of how the destabilizing forces of the climate crisis can be addressed through fiction in the 21st century. The weaving together of the two plot lines, human and arboreal, its ethical reorganization of planetary relations, and its planetary focus combine to produce a novel as compelling in art as in time-sensitive writing. In closing the gap of the previous research, which, as a body, has been seen to be fragmented, the study highlights the promise that an integrated literary inquiry holds in elucidating how vividly narrative can bring into full realization the Ecology of our era, and vice versa.

5. Conclusion, Contributions, Impact, and Recommendations

The results of the current study reveal that *The Overstory* by Richard Powers remains one of the seminal examples of how 21st-century climate fiction can incorporate environmental ethics into not only the thematic scope of the

narrative but also its overarching narrative structure. The text analysis has shown that Powers creates a literary ecosystem where human and non-human stories are inseparable. The polyphonic structuring of the novel in which the trees, the landscapes, and the human characters are equally in control of the narrative corresponds with the moral imperative according to which nature holds an intrinsic value that is independent of its usefulness to the humankind.

The study makes several significant contributions to the field of literary studies. First, it provides an intersecting framework of analysis that brings together three disparate yet overlapping fields of study: ecocriticism, environmental ethics, and Anthropocene studies. This synthesis of the study defeats that fragmentation, revealing that the novel is powerful due to the interaction between its new form and moral sense. Second, it contributes to the development of the notion of a narrative activism, making *The Overstory* not just a text that narrates the ecological crisis but one that is attempting to intervene in it, affecting the content that the population hears about the issue and that might consequently alter their attitudes and ways of acting on the environment. Third, methodologically, it demonstrates the power of theory-informed qualitative close reading, which can be used to address and comprehend the multifaceted interrelations between form, content, and ethical discourse in climate fiction.

These discoveries have their theoretical and practical implication. The manner in which it presents moral reasoning in terms of an engaging narrative, *The Overstory* shows the particular skill of fiction in handling the overwhelming, complicated, urgent nature of the ecological crisis, which is often hard to express factually or scientifically. In a more practical sense, the research highlights the potential application of narrative in environmental education, advocacy, and policy framing. The mechanism of storytelling as a driver of ecological awareness can serve as an example to follow, as it acts as a bridge between knowledge and action.

Several recommendations are presented regarding the level of scholarship and practice. In the study of literary works, future research could be expanded to a larger body of climate fiction to determine whether a similar set of frequently used narrative tactics and moral imperatives is active in different texts. Cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comparisons would help clarify the universality or the culture-bound nature of environmental ethics in the fictional contexts of the 21st century. In the case of ecological humanities and education, studies such as *The Overstory* may be incorporated into classroom practices to make student responses to the environmental crisis more humanistic and less science-heavy.

The study demonstrates that *The Overstory* bewitches the reader through the help of woven narrative voices, an ethical reframing of human-nature relations, and planetary-scale timescales that guide the reader through a literary experience that is both aesthetically captivating and ethically transformative. Working together, these strategies establish the novel as a milestone within the realm of what 21st-century climate fiction might become in terms of mating story-engineering with eco-Intent. This study, therefore, contributes to the body of work that has emerged, placing literature not as a passive reflection of the environmental crisis, but as one capable of imagining and creating ecological futures. It fills the gap that existed in previous studies.

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