



## Exploring the Tree- Based Archive in Richard Powers ' The Overstory

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

Eco-literature plays a crucial role in bridging literature and ecological awareness by blending imaginative storytelling with environmental themes. In *The Overstory*, each tree species selected by the author holds specific significance, highlighting the intricate relationship between humans and trees. This paper aims to explore the nuanced connection between humanity and the natural world, as represented through the "arboreal archive" in Richard Powers' novel. This archive contains memories, feelings and experiences people have with trees and is intended to show the bond between the two. It is a unique combination of science, aesthetics and philosophy. Power tackles the environmental issues of today and asks readers to picture a better world than what we have today. It is hypothesised that this narrative serves as a platform for analysing the Arboreal Archive in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*. As such, the objectives of the research article are to examine the concept of the tree-based archive, investigate human-nature relationships, identify environmental and ecological themes and analyse the role of storytelling in ecological awareness. Through the narratives Powers examines the consequence of human actions on the natural world, the power of activism and the resilience of life.

**Keywords:** human-nature relationship, climate fiction, Eco- literature, environmentalism, Arboreal

Eco-literature is a genre that deals with the relationship between humans and the environment, focusing on ecological themes, environmental issues and the consequences of human actions on nature. It highlights various categories, such as nature writing, environmental activism, and ecological fiction. climate fiction (cli-fi), a sub-genre which deals with the challenges posed by climate change, envisioning futures shaped by environmental crises and human reactions. This emphasis on climate issues underscores the pressing nature of ecological concerns in modern literature.

A tree-based archive is a significant element in eco-literature, using trees as key symbols to delve into themes of ecology, memory, and interconnectedness. In this framework, trees embody resilience and the passage of time, shedding light on human influence on nature and the possibilities for regeneration. Within climate fiction, a tree-based archive can act as a narrative tool to depict the impacts of climate change and underscore the necessity of safeguarding natural environments. By weaving together personal and collective histories with ecological stories, this idea enhances readers' emotional connection to environmental issues, making it a compelling instrument in both eco-literature and climate fiction.

In the grand tapestry of existence, humans and the natural world are intricately intertwined, forming complex and dynamic web of relationships that transcend boundaries and disciplines. Trees have a significant role in

shaping both the natural and the narrative world. Humans depend on trees for numerous life reasons, including the basic necessities like food and shelter. About 28% of the world's fresh oxygen is likely to be produced by trees. According to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), trees cover around 30% of the Earth's land area and play a vital role in supporting 80% of the world's terrestrial biodiversity. Trees on the other hand, are used as symbols to represent life, death, wisdom, strength and renewal by many authors. They are also used as metaphors to compare human experiences with growth and seasons. By being personified with human attributes, they are thought of as companions of people battling with loneliness. In addition, they are notable for exploring environmentalism, conservation and the intricate relationship humans have with nature. Apart from preserving information about ecological processes and environmental conservations; they act as the archives portraying the web of human and arboreal networks.

As the eco-critic Timothy Morton so aptly puts it, "The natural world is a vast interconnected web of relationships", This quote encapsulates the essence of Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, a novel that reveals the intricate intersections between humans and the environment by portraying the web of human and arboreal experience. The title *The Overstory* is in itself a contrast to Powers' novel because it actually represents the understory, the hidden, lesser-known or marginalized aspects of the society and the environment.

This paper explores Richard Powers' *The Overstory* as one of the forefronts of this genre by highlighting the interconnectedness of the world of trees and humans. Powers' interest in science, technology, and literature, along with his unique blend of scientific curiosity, literary innovation, and philosophical insight provides an insight to the environmental situations of the present era. Through a wide spread narrative that spans over centuries, continents, and species, Powers masterfully weaves together the threads of botany, ecology, activism, and human experience. He embodies the spirit of eco literature, which encourages individuals to engage with the critical environmental issues of our time and to imagine a more sustainable, compassionate, and interconnected future.

This paper attempts to explore Powers' various applications of tree attributes throughout the novel. The majestic and resilient tree is used as a symbol of the interconnectedness of all living beings throughout the novel. Humans and trees are naturally seen cohesive with each other specifically in their roles to maintain the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels on earth. "Trees co-exist with humans and there seems to be a natural connection between humans and trees." (Krishnan 84). This reveals the intricate intersections between humans and the environment by portraying the web of human and arboreal experience. Besides describing the collective knowledge and secrets stored within trees, the tree-based archive also operates to reveal the cohesion between man and trees. This paper delves into the arboreal archive, by exploring the arboreal narrative of the novel.

Powers' mention of several trees in his novel makes it function as a symbolic arboreal archive. The symbolism of the trees used, their characteristics and their significance, provide a different perspective of the natural world. American Chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) used by Patricia Westford as research focus, is a symbol of loss, resilience and adaptation. Pine (*Pinus* spp.) which was Douglas Pavlicek's forest solace represents wisdom and longevity. Oak (*Quercus* spp.) being Olivia Vandergriff's tree activism embodies strength and community. Maple (*Acer* spp.) which took great part in Patricia Westerford's childhood memories is considered to represent the beauty of change and adaptation. Willow tree (*Salix* spp.) which Neelay relayed on to find solace near her home, is associated with flexibility and resilience to thrive in challenging environments. Ash tree's (*Fraxinus* spp.) used by Adam Appich to study its unique relationship with fungi, represents its strength and flexibility. Beech tree (*Fagus grandifolia*) which was deeply connected with the logger Doug, symbolizes stability and endurance. Sycamore tree (*Platanus occidentalis*) in which Artist Mimi finds inspiration, symbolizing the connection between creativity and nature represents adaptability and resilience. These tree species, among others, are woven throughout the novel illustrate Powers portrayal of a symbolic arboreal archive in his 'The Overstory'

Powers' used tree attributes to portray the interconnectedness humans have with trees through their memories, emotions and experiences. In the novel he masterfully weaves together the stories of nine individuals connected by their relationships with trees, and how their individual experiences and perspectives highlight the importance of trees and the natural world. His use of branching narratives also adds to the arboreal style of the novel. In *The Overstory*, Adam Appich, a scientist, studies the unique relationships between trees and fungi. Adam Appich's fond memories of his childhood treehouse, built in a sturdy oak, shape his relationship with trees and inform his later work as a scientist. Adam's research reveals the interconnectedness of forest ecosystems, demonstrating how trees communicate and cooperate through vast networks of mycelium. This understanding of the arboreal archive challenges traditional notions of individualism and competition, instead revealing a world of mutualism and reciprocity. Neelay's creation of a virtual forest, inspired by his childhood experiences in the woods, serves as a refuge and a connection to his past. Patricia's memories of the now-extinct American chestnut tree, which she studied as a scientist, haunt her and inspire her activism. Years later she wrote her own book on trees named 'The Secret Forest' with the opening lines, "You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even

now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes. . .  
 ”. (Powers, “Roots” 137)

Douglas finds solace in the pine trees of the Pacific Northwest, reminding him of his father and his own mortality. Mimi’s tree sculptures, created from fallen trees, serve as a tribute to her past and a connection to the natural world. The Hoel family’s history is tied to the oak tree on their farm, symbolizing their connection to the land and their heritage. These memories, among others, illustrate the profound impact trees have on human lives, serving as witnesses to our experiences, emotions, and relationships.

The arboreal archive also stresses on the collective consciousness in safekeeping of the forest. “The link between the characters, settings, and plot shows how ultimately, the responsibility to preserve and protect trees and forests are down to everyone.” (Athallah, Anwar, and Desvalini 339). The exploitation of trees through logging and clear-cutting, along with urban development, industrial agriculture, scientific research, commercial ventures, and tourism, results in emotional trauma, physical harm, displacement of indigenous communities, loss of cultural heritage, environmental degradation, and a profound spiritual disconnection from nature. In the novel, activism inspired by the Life Defense Force brings attention to the plight of trees and the environment by creating a sense of community and connection between the characters. The ability of the humans and the trees to adapt and evolve in response to these changes demonstrate the notion of resilience. These reveal the collective memories humans have with trees in the novel.

Through the lens of the arboreal archive, the mirroring of the characters with tree-like relationships with each other are seen in the novel. Just like trees that grow together with their roots intertwining, Adam and Patricia support each other in their shared passion for trees. Neelay and Dorothy’s branching relationship is like a branch that splits off from a trunk, and their paths diverge, but they remain connected through their shared experiences. The Hoel family’s relationships are like a root system, with each member connected and nourished by the others, providing a sense of support, shelter, comfort, protection and strength in times of need. Like leaves, Mimi and Cassia’s leafy connection touch each other but remain separate, their relationship is one of proximity and affection, but also independence. Like trees that grow together in a forest, Douglas and Adam’s friendship is forest-like, shaped by their shared experiences and surroundings. Like seeds that are planted and grow into new trees, Patricia and William’s work and ideas have a seed-like legacy and are passed onto future generations. These tree-like relationships illustrate the complexities and depths of human connections.

Tree-like relationships also exist within the individual human selves. Adam Appich’s conflicting desires between his scientific and artistic passions are like two branches growing in different directions, competing for resources and attention. Patricia’s experiences and memories are like the rings of a tree trunk, each layer building upon the last, forming a complex and resilient whole as her layered identity. “What use are we, to trees? She remembers the Buddha’s words: A tree is a wondrous thing that shelters, feeds, and protects all living things. It even offers shade to the axmen who destroy it. And with those words, she has her book’s end” (Powers, “Trunk” 219-220). Neelay Mehta’s online persona and real-life self are like two trees with interconnected roots, influencing and nourishing each other. Douglas’s grief over his wife’s passing is like a tree that has lost a branch, and now adapting and growing new connections to cope with the loss. Mimi’s memories of her past are like a dense forest, with paths and connections waiting to be uncovered and explored. Cassia’s journey towards self-discovery is like a tree’s seasonal cycles, with periods of seasonal growth, decay, and renewal. Nick’s search for his rootless identity and belonging is like a tree without roots, struggling to find stability and connection. These reveal the complexities and depths of human consciousness humans have within their own selves.

Powers’ novel explores the ways in which humans have sought to connect with the natural world in search of meaning, purpose, and transcendence. In addition to its ecological significance, the arboreal archive also holds a psychological and spiritual importance. Humans and the natural world go hand in hand that we need each other to thrive. This also explains why humans turn towards nature for comfort every time they feel frustrated, expressing their need to inhale ‘fresh air’.

The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quite alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. As long as this exists, and it certainly always will, I know that then there will always be comfort for every sorrow, whatever the circumstances may be. And I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles. (Frank 192)

The destruction of forests in turn results in the destruction of humanity. Thus, it helps us to re-evaluate an individual’s place in the larger ecosystem by emphasizing the interconnected notion of the human and the natural world. Ultimately, Powers offers a vision of hope and resilience by presenting a compelling case for the importance in preserving and honouring the arboreal archive for a more sustainable and harmonious

coexistence with the environment, encouraging people to rethink their relationships with trees and the environment.

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