



## ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND POTENTIAL IMPACT ON NATURE IN RICHARD POWERS' *THE OVERSTORY*

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### ABSTRACT

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* reflects the ecological issues and the conservation of our ecosystem. His exploration of the exploitation of the forest and environment brings an awareness of global warming and climate change. Powers' *The Overstory*, through many different characters and their profound relationship with trees, brings life again to the forest in this novel. This transformative power of awareness and activism for the conservation of the environment put all the characters on the same line. Inspiration from these different characters' struggles ultimately promotes a more sustainable and harmonious future. In the present time, humanity is distracted, and the effects of technology have made this world wound. Bringing back the awareness of our ecosystem and curing the degradation we made to this world. Richard Powers always tends to bring awareness, and his works will be the remedy to this problem. This paper deals with the theme of environmental conservation and its potential impact on the natural world concerning Powers' *The Overstory*.

**Keywords:** Richard Powers, The Overstory, Sustainability, exploitation and Trees,

### Introduction

From the beginning, man never got separated from nature. Since the time of "Hebrews" and "Hesiod", individuals have always experienced an emergent need to

preserve the environment; and even Plato remarked on "severe deforestation, and lamented the loss of fertile soil and defaced landscapes" (Wapner, 2010, p.39). In this book, trees are fully realized as characters.

On the one hand, they engage in activities that are common to humans, such as teamwork, friendship, aid, survival, conflict, and more (Britannica, 2016). Powers is careful, however, not to overly anthropomorphize trees; after all, they are not exactly like ordinary people, and if people are going to honestly face what people have done to the planet and find ways to behave better, people have to see trees for what they are. Their age, their experience of time, their abilities—all of these things are hard for humans to comprehend, but people must procure any sustainable future. The fundamental effects of the natural world on humans and how nature makes an indirect conversation with the world are discussed in this paper as they relate to Powers' *The Overstory*.

### **Nature and Humanity: The Inevitable Engagement**

The Hoel chestnut has a significant influence on numerous areas. It first affects how readers perceive the Hoel family—their hardships, tenacity, development, and dispersal across time and space. It also represents how humans have affected nature. Only one of the six chestnuts that the Hoels plant survives. It flourishes, withstands the blight, and becomes a joyous and hopeful beacon. But, like humans infect the natural world with greed and desiccation, it grows sicker with time. Eventually, it is chopped

down, a sign of even more devastation. Powers says,

It's his birthright, the Hoel emblem. No other family in the county had a tree like the Hoel tree. And no other family in Iowa could match the multi-generation photo project for pure weirdness. And yet the adults seemed sworn never to say where the project was going. Neither his grandparents nor his father could explain to him the point of the thick flip-book." (Powers, 2018, p.22)

The trees in this book grow into fully realised characters. They engage in cooperative efforts, social support, mutual aid, competition, and other behaviours that are common to humans. However, Powers refrains from making trees into human characters because readers need to recognise them for what they are if they are to take responsibility for their actions on Earth and learn to change their ways. Understanding their age, their experience of time, and their abilities is challenging for readers, but it is crucial if people are to ensure a sustainable future. Powers says,

The Greeks had a word, *xenia*—guest friendship—a command to take care of traveling strangers, to open your door to whoever is out there, because anyone passing by, far from home, might be God. Ovid tells the



story of two immortals who came to Earth in disguise to cleanse the sickened world. No one would let them in but one old couple, Baucis and Philemon. And their reward for opening their door to strangers was to live on after death as trees—an oak and a linden—huge and gracious and intertwined. What we care for, we will grow to resemble. And what we resemble will hold us, when we are us no longer.” (Powers, 2018, p.450)

Death is another means by which nature communicates with humanity and the rest of the world. Powers incorporates death, a part of everyone's life, into his story to show that it is unavoidable. Many of his main characters are dying or have passed away by the end of the book. Trees are also passing away, but their deaths at the hands of humans are very different from their deaths in the wild. Death in the trees world is largely foreign to the human mind. Powers encourages readers to embrace death in *The Overstory* rather than shrink from it. Because of this, the fear of dying is more significant than it has ever been. Because our fundamental belief that the individual creates meaning is diametrically opposed to the ultimate fact of existence—that everything perishes—people are all running around in a frenzy of denial. He argues that

the best way to approach mortality is not as an end but as a return to a mode of being that works with the world rather than against it. Powers says,

Death races across Connecticut and Massachusetts, jumping dozens of miles a year. Trees succumb by the hundreds of thousands. A country watches dumbstruck as New England's priceless chestnuts melt away. The tree of the tanning industry, of railroad ties, train cars, telegraph poles, fuel, fences, houses, barns, fine desks, tables, pianos, crates, paper pulp, and endless free shade and food—the most harvested tree in the country—is vanishing.” (Powers, 2018, p.17)

## Conclusion

This paper has given instances where nature speaks to the world. Some trees survive the blight and become a symbol of joy and hope in the novel. However, as time passes, the natural world gets sicker as humans spread their greed and desertification throughout it. Its eventual destruction is a warning of impending doom. There are instances where interact with one another in ways typical of humans, including cooperation, social support, mutual aid and healthy competition. To help readers learn to accept responsibility for

their actions on Earth and make positive changes in their lives, Powers avoids making trees into human characters. Finally, death is definitely another important way nature addresses the world. Richard Powers encourages readers to embrace death in *The Overstory* rather than shrink from it. Because of this, the fear of dying is more significant than it has ever been.

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