
ECOLOGICAL GRIEF AND ENVIRONMENTAL MEMORY IN RICHARD POWERS' *THE OVERSTORY***RIFFAT RASHEED**

Assistant Professor of English, Higher Education Department, Govt Graduate College for Women, Gulberg, Lahore.

Riffat.islahuddin@gmail.com**Abstract**

*The current study examines the representation of ecological grief and environmental memory in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) from an ecocritical perspective. The research aims to analyse the portrayal of characters' emotions in relation to environmental degradation and to examine the significance of forests as living archives of ecological memory. Within the framework of a qualitative research design, the paper provides a close reading of the experiences of key characters, including Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, Douglas Pavlicek, Nicholas Hoel, and Winston Ma. The findings show that ecological grief in *The Overstory* can be viewed as an individual and collective reaction to biodiversity loss, deforestation, and ecological destruction that turns the environmental awareness of the characters into an ethical position and their activism. At the same time, the author presents forests as dynamic ecological communities that conserve biological, historical, and cultural memory in terms of an interrelated communication and survival system. In other words, Richard Powers endows trees with consciousness in order to promote an ecocentric worldview rather than an anthropocentric one. Moreover, the results show that environmental activism in the novel is understood as the practical manifestation of ecological grief and environmental memory, thereby implying a moral responsibility to preserve endangered ecosystems not only for us but also for future generations. In conclusion, the present study reveals that *The Overstory* makes a valuable contribution to the modern ecocritical discussion by demonstrating the role of literature in fostering ecological awareness and ethics.*

Keywords: Ecological Grief, Environmental Memory, Ecocriticism, Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

1. Introduction

Growing ecological problems have made environmental issues one of the most crucial topics in modern literary studies. Issues such as climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation have stimulated research on the psychological impact of environmental issues in the literature. In this context, notions of ecological grief and environmental memory have appeared as an analytical tool, revealing the deep connection between man and nature. Ecological grief is an emotional reaction to the loss or threat of loss of ecosystems, species, and landscapes. At the same time, environmental memory concerns the role of the natural environment as a carrier of cultural, historical, and collective memories (Cunsolo and Ellis, 2018).

Ecocriticism provides a theoretical basis for analysing the representation of environmental issues in literature, emphasising the interrelation between the human and non-human worlds. Thus, Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. 108), which forces readers to rethink humanity's ethical obligation to nature. Similarly, Buell (1995) claims that "environmental imagination allows the writer to restructure public consciousness by transforming ecological crises into moral/cultural rather than scientific problems" (pp. 2-3).

First of all, ecocritical theory can be used to analyse literary representations of environmental crisis because of its emphasis on interdependence between humans and the non-human world. Ecocriticism addresses "the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. 108), prompting a reconsideration of humanity's moral duty towards nature. Similarly, Buell (1995) claims that environmental imagination allows writers to reimagine

ecological crises in terms of moral and cultural issues rather than science (pp. 2-3). These two approaches have had a great impact on the analysis of environmental literature and cli-fi novels. *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers is considered one of the key contemporary ecological novels because it questions anthropocentric presuppositions by depicting trees as actors rather than as part of the landscape. Interconnected stories of people reveal memories, resilience, and the ecology of forests, as well as the destructive influence of deforestation. Scholars believe that the novel extends the concept of environmental ethics by making readers aware of the agency of the non-human world and the moral necessity of conservation (Ali, 2025).

Consequently, the present study analyses the concepts of ecological grief and environmental memory in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* to examine how the novel conveys the emotional response to ecological destruction while preserving the forest's historical and cultural memory. By analysing these interrelated notions, this paper aims to reveal the contribution of contemporary literature to ecological consciousness.

1.1 Significance of the Study

In terms of its contribution to the rapidly developing field of ecocriticism, the current research examines the representation of ecological grief and environmental memory in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*. Although there is already a considerable amount of research on environmental ethics, climate fiction, and ecological consciousness in *The Overstory*, far fewer studies have examined the interrelated aspects of ecological grief and environmental memory, which are regarded here as complementary notions that affect both human and non-human characters. Moreover, the research will contribute to literary studies by showing how *The Overstory* deconstructs anthropocentrism and highlights the agency of forests and trees as sources of memory and ecological wisdom. In addition, the results of the study will be useful for ecocriticism and environmental humanities scholars seeking comprehensive insight into the emotional, ethical, and cultural aspects of environmental destruction. Finally, the research is significant for its contribution to current environmental concerns related to sustainability and environmental awareness.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To examine the representation of ecological grief in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*.
2. To analyse how environmental memory is constructed and preserved through the depiction of forests, trees, and natural landscapes in the novel.
3. To explore how the interrelationship between ecological grief and environmental memory challenges anthropocentric perspectives and promotes ecological consciousness.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How is ecological grief represented in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*?
2. In what ways does *The Overstory* construct and preserve environmental memory through its portrayal of forests, trees, and natural landscapes?
3. How do ecological grief and environmental memory collectively challenge anthropocentric perspectives and promote ecological consciousness in the novel?

2. Literature Review

One of the most popular paradigms in modern literary research is ecocriticism, which focuses on the relationship between literature and the natural environment. Scholars are invited to examine the representation of environmental crises, ethics, and the interconnection between human beings and nature in literary texts. Ecocriticism is described by Glotfelty (1996) as the study of the connection between literature and the environment, whereas Buell (1995) notes that literature contributes to the development of the environmental imagination by prompting the reader to reflect on his/her ethical responsibility towards nature. This approach has been

developed by Buell et al. (2011), who claim that environmental literature. Modern-day scholars of environmental humanities have also defined ecological grief as a consequence of environmental degradation. Ecological grief, according to Cunsolo and Ellis (2018), can be described as “the pain, grief, and emotional suffering felt in relation to threatened or actual loss of connection to natural places.” This research has paved the way for future studies by legitimising ecological grief as an emotional response to environmental loss. Further building on the work of Cunsolo and Ellis (2018), Galway et al.’s (2024) global scoping review indicates that ecological grief is influenced by sociocultural, geographic, and political factors, meaning that different communities experience it differently. It changes its focus from praising nature to discussing climate change, biodiversity, and ecology.

The notion of environmental memory has also been considered relevant to ecocriticism for the way it describes landscapes as holding historical, cultural, and ecological experiences. Instead of considering nature as a mere backdrop, environmental memory treats forests, rivers, and other ecosystems as the sources of collective memory. It is in line with Haraway’s (2016) statement that human and non-human beings are interrelated in terms of survival and responsibility. Similarly, Nixon (2011) uses the notion of slow violence to describe how environmental damage occurs unnoticed by people.

Scholars have extensively studied The Overstory (2018) by Richard Powers because it portrays trees not only as parts of the landscape but also as active agents in ecological history. Trexler (2015) claims that contemporary climate fiction encourages people to think about environmental problems through the lens of emotionally charged stories. Studies focusing on the environmental significance of *The Overstory* have explored themes such as ecological grief, environmental activism, and non-human agency. According to Ali (2025), Powers employs ecocriticism in his novel, exposing the negative impacts of deforestation while promoting ecological ethics. In a similar vein, Ramadhan (2026) demonstrates that the novel merges eco-trauma and environmental memory to highlight the long-term effects of environmental destruction on both humans and nature. Recently, Banerjee and Paul (2026) analysed *The Overstory* as a manifestation of youth climate activism and demonstrated that ecological grief serves as a means of political struggle against environmental exploitation. Therefore, the works analysed above demonstrate that Powers’ novel goes beyond traditional environmental stories and illustrates the interconnections among grief, memory, and activism in response to the ecological crisis. It should be noted that there has been little research analysing ecological grief and environmental memory in combination as analytical tools.

The emerging field of environmental humanities has seen a growing concern about the emotional ramifications of environmental degradation. Ecological grief can be described as an emotional response to the loss of ecosystems, species, and landscapes due to environmental change. This definition laid the foundation for research on the emotional impact of climate change. Furthermore, as pointed out by Galway et al. (2024), ecological grief has social, cultural, and geographical contexts and is not solely a personal or psychological matter. In the same way, Pihkala (2024) suggests that ecological grief encompasses various types of environmental losses, ranging from species extinction to landscape damage.

Another idea gaining prominence in ecocritical studies is environmental memory. This is because the concept examines how landscapes can capture cultural, historical, and ecological memory. Nixon (2011) proposes the concept of slow violence to describe how environmental damage unfolds slowly yet leaves long-lasting ecological and sociological impacts that often go unnoticed. Similarly, Haraway (2016) stresses the importance of seeing human and non-human creatures as cohabitants in ecological environments. Iovino and Oppermann (2014) also

propose that matter has narrative agency and, therefore, landscapes, forests, and ecosystems act as active archives of environmental memory.

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) has become one of the most talked-about novels in the climate fiction genre because it focuses on trees and shifts the paradigm of human-focused stories. Trexler (2015) asserts that climate fiction enables people to imagine environmental disasters through emotionally appealing literary forms. Therefore, literature serves as a means of creating ecological consciousness. Heise (2016) makes the same point, arguing that biodiversity and species extinction are redefined through literature.

Academic studies concerning *The Overstory* have added to the above theories. According to Ali (2024), Powers uses ecocritical narrative approaches to criticise anthropocentrism and promote environmental stewardship. Ramadhan (2026) adds that the novel blends eco-trauma with environmental memory by portraying forests as living archives that contain ecological and experiential histories. Ecological grief, as portrayed in *The Overstory*, is viewed by Banerjee and Paul (2026) as a form of political resistance, in which environmental loss motivates ecological activism among the novel's characters. Other scholarly works also highlight Powers' focus on non-human agency and ecocentric ethics, in which he represents forests as agents in ecological history.

Although the above-mentioned literary work has been analysed by many researchers using ecocritical concepts such as ecocriticism, environmental ethics, eco-trauma, and non-human agency, little research has examined ecological grief and environmental memory as related concepts. Indeed, the above-mentioned literary devices are usually discussed separately, being viewed either through the prism of the emotional aspect of ecological problems or environmental memory as an ecological concept per se. Thus, there is a lack of scholarly discussion of how Powers incorporates the aforementioned concepts into his ecological vision and promotes environmental awareness.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The current study employs a qualitative research design with textual analysis to investigate the representation of ecological grief and environmental memory in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018). The use of a qualitative research design is justified because it enables a comprehensive analysis of literary texts by investigating various themes, symbols, narrative approaches, and ideologies in relation to their ecological and cultural contexts.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The study relies on ecocriticism as its key theoretical framework. Based on the works of Glotfelty (1996), Buell (1995), and Garrard (2012), the research investigates the interrelationships between humans and nature. The notions of ecological grief (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018) and environmental memory (Nixon, 2011; Haraway, 2016; Iovino & Oppermann, 2014) serve as additional interpretive lenses while analysing the selected textual evidence.

3.3 Data Source

The primary data source for this research is Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* (2018). The novel is used as a research corpus to extract textual evidence on ecological grief, environmental memory, forests, biodiversity, ecological destruction, and environmental activism.

3.4 Procedure for Collecting Data

Data collection is conducted through repeated close readings of the novel. As the novel is read repeatedly, excerpts relevant to the study's objectives are extracted, highlighted, and categorised into emerging themes.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic textual analysis will be used as the method for data analysis in this study. The collected textual data will be analysed and coded into thematic categories related to ecological grief and environmental memory. These themes will be interpreted in light of ecocritical concepts and the existing scholarly literature. The emphasis will be on narration, symbolism, characters, metaphor, and non-human agency in order to understand the construction of ecological consciousness in the novel.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Theme 1: Ecological Grief as an Emotional Response to Environmental Loss

Ecological grief is described in Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* (2018) as an emotion that significantly changes how the characters see themselves, one another, and the environment. Ecological grief is depicted not as an individual emotional state but as a collective reaction to the destruction of nature and the disappearance of plant and animal species. This literary work reveals that ecological grief involves not only sadness and despair but also guilt, anxiety, helplessness, and a sense of moral responsibility regarding the environment. Thus, the author shows how environmental destruction influences not only ecosystems but people as well – their memories and emotions.

The story of Patricia Westerford is a particularly good example of ecological grief portrayed in the novel. As a scientist who specialises in studying trees, Patricia sees forests being destroyed and millions of species vanishing before her eyes. Powers describes the enormity of biodiversity loss, as Patricia states that "Species disappear. Patricia writes of too many species to count. Reefs bleach and wetlands dry. Things are getting lost that have not yet been found. Kinds of life vanish a thousand times faster than the baseline extinction rate" (Powers, 2018, p. 374). In the quote above, the author turns facts into emotions, illustrating that the realisation of environmental damage evokes ecological grief. In other words, Patricia's grief is not only about species becoming extinct but also about the destruction of ecological balance.

Ecological grief is described in the story by Winston Ma and his family members. In the novel, the deterioration of the family's mulberry tree is related to Charlotte Ma's declining health. It reflects the inseparable link between human life and the ecological system. In this case, the narrator says, "Bacteria blacken the leaves" (Powers, 2018, p. 45). The narrator sees the tree's destruction as a physical manifestation of environmental and emotional problems. As the tree dies, Winston feels a growing feeling of despondency, while Mimi notices that she has never heard "this cheerful, endlessly resourceful man sound so low" (Powers, 2018, p. 45). The man reveals his sorrow when thinking, "My work is all done. My silk farm is finished. Fishing is going down, a little bit every year. What do I do now?" (Powers, 2018, p. 46). From these words, one can see that the destruction of nature affects not only the loss of resources but also one's personal identity, culture, and economic situation. Finally, Winston's suicide under the mulberry tree proves that the destruction of ecological systems leads to serious psychological problems, and ecological grief becomes an unbearable burden for people.

Olivia Vandergriff can also experience ecological grief. After Olivia's experience of near-death, she becomes spiritually connected to trees and realises the devastating impact of human exploitation of nature. This shift in Olivia's emotions leads her to engage in environmental movements, showing that grief can serve as a trigger for ecological resistance. Instead of just grieving in silence, Olivia transforms her pain into action to protect threatened forests. Likewise, the wartime experiences of Douglas Pavlicek, along with his love for the forest, prove that personal tragedy and ecological consciousness go hand in hand. Olivia's growing affinity for ancient trees demonstrates an understanding that environmental degradation is not only detrimental to biodiversity but also threatens humanity.

Ecological grief is also portrayed throughout the book *The Overstory* as an environmental memory. According to Powers, “Life has a way of talking to the future. It is called memory” (Powers, 2018, p. 12). In this regard, ecological grief becomes an act of remembrance that opposes the environmental loss and challenges humanity’s lack of concern regarding its impact on nature. Ecological grief allows remembering what has already been lost due to ecological destruction in the past or present. Grieving forests, species, and landscapes thus becomes an ethical obligation and responsibility for people who care about their environment and want to protect it from any further damage. To do this, one must be environmentally conscious and concerned with ecological issues. Through Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, Douglas Pavlicek, Winston Ma, and other characters, Powers shows how ecological grief becomes a driving force for reimagining the existing relationships between humanity and nature.

Table 4.1

Quotations Illustrating Ecological Grief in Richard Powers’ *The Overstory*

Quotation	Contextual Significance	Page
“Species disappear. Patricia writes of them. Too many species to count. Reefs bleach and wetlands dry. Things are getting lost that have not yet been found. Kinds of life vanish a thousand times faster than the baseline extinction rate.”	Patricia’s scientific observations transform ecological data into an emotional testimony of biodiversity loss and environmental collapse.	p. 374
“Bacteria blacken the leaves.”	The deterioration of the mulberry tree symbolises the interconnected decline of ecological health and human well-being.	p. 45
“Mimi has never heard this cheerful, endlessly resourceful man sound so low.”	Winston Ma’s emotional decline demonstrates how environmental degradation affects personal identity and family life.	p. 45
“My work is all done. My silk farm is finished. Fishing is going down a little bit every year. What I do now.”	Winston’s statement reflects the loss of livelihood, purpose, and cultural identity caused by ecological decline.	p. 46
“[He] sits under the crumbling mulberry and puts a Smith & Wesson 686 with hardwood grips up to his temple...”	Winston’s death represents the extreme psychological consequences of ecological grief and environmental loss.	p. 47
“Life has a way of talking to the future. It is called memory.”	The novel presents memory as a means of preserving ecological knowledge and resisting environmental erasure across generations.	

4.2 Theme 2: Forests as Repositories of Environmental Memory

In Richard Powers’ book *The Overstory* (2018), forests are viewed as living organisms that store environmental memories rather than as mere natural scenery. The book is filled with the notion that forests preserve environmental memories, transfer biological data from one generation to another, and contain histories that extend far beyond people’s experience. In challenging traditional ideas about the nature of memory, Powers suggests that memory is not

just a human phenomenon; rather, it is an ecological process that unfolds within trees, forests, and nature more broadly. Forests are thus seen as living archives that store the evolutionary, cultural, and environmental history of the planet.

The notion of environmental memory is first mentioned when it is said: “Life has a way of talking to the future. It is called memory” (Powers, 2018, p. 12). This succinctly formulated definition lays the groundwork for viewing memory as the means by which ecological memory is passed down from one generation to the next. In further development of this idea, Powers writes: “Life has a way of talking to the future. It is called memory. It is called genes” (Powers, 2018, p. 12). Here, memory is viewed not only as cultural memory but also as genetic memory, illustrating that the environment is imprinted on living organisms.

Patricia Westerford’s scientific work lends further credibility to the idea that forests can be considered intelligent ecosystems. Powers notes that she found out that “trees talk to each other via the underground networks of fungus. It turns out that plant life is more complex than we have assumed” (Powers, 2018, p. 84). This quote implies that forests have a communication and memory system that allows them to adapt to environmental changes as a community. Instead of being isolated organisms, trees are members of a community that exchanges information and experiences.

Moreover, the idea of the collective character of environmental memory is confirmed by the following statement: “Link enough trees together, and a forest grows aware” (Powers, 2018, p. 84). This phrase shows that the intelligence of ecological systems is created not by separate organisms but by relationships between them. In other words, Powers questions anthropocentric concepts of consciousness and demonstrates that it arises from connections within the ecosystem. As a result, forests become the storage of the environment’s experience. In the book, a distinction is made between human perception of time and the time of forests. Powers states that “People have no idea what time is. They think it is a line...” (Powers, 2018, p. 358). Then he goes on to say that time is like “one spreading ring wrapped around another, outward and outward until the thinnest skin of Now depends for its being on the enormous mass of everything that has already died” (Powers, 2018, p. 358). This comparison between human linear time and the time of forests illustrates the gradual accumulation of environmental memory across generations. It shows that ecological memories are preserved much like tree rings represent the past, illustrating how each generation lives because of the environmental memories of previous generations. Individual trees can also be seen as witnesses of environmental and cultural memories. For instance, the American chestnut tree is associated with the Hoel family's memories, whereas the mulberry tree in the Ma family symbolises the cultural memory of immigration and intergenerational experience. Just like the American chestnut tree, the redwoods are also considered witnesses of ecological memories.

Essentially, *The Overstory* shows that the destruction of the forest entails not just the loss of biodiversity but also the erasure of centuries-old knowledge gained through evolution. In presenting the forests as the keepers of environmental memories, Powers shows that ecological preservation requires not only the preservation of biological diversity but also of environmental history. This is evident in the work of Patricia Westerford and in the interrelated stories of all the characters in the book.

Table 4.2

Quotations Illustrating Forests as Repositories of Environmental Memory in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*

Quotation	Contextual Significance	Page
"Life has a way of talking to the future. It is called memory."	Establishes memory as a biological and ecological process that extends beyond human consciousness.	p. 12
"Life has a way of talking to the future. It is called memory. It is called genes."	Demonstrates that ecological memory is transmitted through genetic inheritance across generations.	p. 12
"A forest knows things. They wire themselves up underground. There are brains down there, ones our own brains are not shaped to see. Root plasticity, problem-solving, and decision-making. Fungal synapses."	Illustrates the forest's underground communication network as a system of collective intelligence and environmental memory.	p. 84
"Link enough trees together, and a forest grows aware."	Suggests that environmental memory and ecological consciousness emerge through interconnected relationships among trees.	p. 84
"Outsiders discovered how seeds remember the seasons of their childhood and set buds accordingly."	Demonstrates that environmental information is biologically preserved and transmitted through seeds.	p. 84
"People have no idea what time is... They cannot see that time is one spreading ring wrapped around another..."	Contrasts human linear time with the cyclical and cumulative temporal framework through which forests preserve environmental memory.	p. 358

4.3 Theme 3: Non-human Agency and the Voice of Trees

In *The Overstory*, Richard Powers questions the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy by presenting trees as active rather than passive participants in nature, each having its unique temporality, communication, and ecology. From the very first pages of the novel, the reader is acquainted with the chestnut that "has an entirely different sense of time" (Powers, 2018, p. 3), suggesting that the tree is part of a temporal process far beyond human perception. Such a special temporal relation is a consequence of the independence of the non-human world. Trees have their own ecology, which is independent of humans; there are no processes that concern people. The author proves this idea by saying that "the chestnut does not need humans. It needs only time, soil, and the right amount of light" (Powers, 2018, p. 3).

The author extends the idea of non-human agency through narrative events that undermine the belief in the supremacy of the human race. In particular, Nicholas Hoel, the man who spent many years photographing a chestnut tree, finally concludes that "the tree was watching him" (Powers, 2018, p. 24). Such a shift subverts the traditional dynamics of observing and being observed, suggesting that something other than humans can perceive the surrounding reality. Instead of being an object to be observed, the tree emerges as an agent that quietly watches the lives of people throughout the centuries.

The novel even provides scientific evidence about the notion that trees engage in sophisticated forms of cooperation. According to Powers, “Wounded trees release chemical messages into the air, and other trees alter their chemistry in response” (Powers, 2018, p. 85). Thus, it is clear that trees communicate with one another, respond to danger, and participate in a network of reciprocal support systems. Additionally, the novel indicates that “Trees are social beings, connected through fungal mycelium in the soil that enables them to exchange resources and information” (Powers, 2018, p. 84). In this case, it becomes evident that forest ecosystems arise from interactions among plants. The fungal mycelium acts as a living communication and resource-exchange system, representing a collective intelligence that contradicts the notion that agency is a uniquely human feature.

The philosophical implications of this ecological vision are well summarised in Powers’s statement that “the forest is a community of subjects, not a collection of objects” (Powers, 2018, p. 356). This quote reflects the new meaning ascribed to nature’s moral standing, in which trees are presented as beings that should be recognised and treated ethically rather than as mere objects to be exploited. Throughout the novel, Powers emphasises the lives of trees, their ecological relationships, resilience, and connections. Recognising the agency of the more-than-human world is important for solving today’s environmental problems. The voice of the forest is heard not through spoken words but through the roots of trees, growth rings, the chemistry of communication, and ecology. With this book, Powers invites his readers to respect other modes of expression in the natural world.

Table 4.3

Quotations Illustrating Non-human Agency and the Voice of Trees in Richard Powers’ *The Overstory*

Quotation	Contextual Significance	Page
“The first thing you should know about the chestnut is that it has an entirely different sense of time.”	Establishes non-human temporality as a form of agency. Trees operate according to their own rhythms rather than human schedules.	p. 3
“The chestnut does not need humans. It needs only time, soil, and the right amount of light.”	Challenges anthropocentric assumptions by affirming trees’ ecological independence and self-sufficiency.	p. 3
“He had spent years thinking he was watching the tree. Then he realised: the tree was watching him.”	Reverses the conventional relationship between observer and observed, presenting the tree as an active perceiver.	p. 24
“Wounded trees send chemical signals through the air, and other trees change their chemistry in response.”	Demonstrates communication, cooperation, and adaptive responses within forest ecosystems.	p. 85
“Trees are social creatures, linked together by underground fungal networks that allow them to share resources and information.”	Highlights collective intelligence and ecological interdependence through mycorrhizal networks.	p. 84
“The forest is a community of subjects, not a collection of objects.”	Summarises the novel’s ecological philosophy by presenting trees as living subjects deserving ethical consideration.	p. 356

4.4 Theme 4: Human-Nature Interconnectedness and Ecological Consciousness

Powers rejects the idea of human exceptionalism by suggesting that ecological consciousness is an epiphany of humankind’s connection to the nature around them. Unlike in many literary

works, where connectivity is understood in philosophical and theoretical terms, in Powers' work it is understood as a lived experience for the characters as they come to terms with it through their losses, scientific discoveries, and activism. As such, Powers says that "there are no individuals. There are not even separate species. Everything is connected" (Powers, 2018, p. 356). It implies that the author rejects the Cartesian idea of separation between man and nature. The quotation shows that all forms of life are part of an interconnected ecosystem in which each species depends on others to survive and thrive.

The story reflects the growth of ecological awareness via the transformations of its characters. While Patricia Westerford starts as a serious scientist, she eventually realises the intricacy of forest ecosystems and concludes that "a tree is a community of lives" (Powers, 2018, p. 84). Thus, her view of trees changes from seeing them as independent living things to seeing them as living ecological communities maintained by an enormous number of connections among living beings, such as plants, fungi, and microorganisms. Powers further broadens the scope of this approach, stating that "the world is a web, not a ladder" (Powers, 2018, p. 401). The author rejects hierarchical approaches that place people above other living things and presents the world as a network of relations in which each living being is necessary for the proper functioning of the whole. Therefore, people become "brief patterns in a vast and ancient web" (Powers, 2018, p. 370).

Powers also argues that ecological consciousness entails people realising that there is no such thing as total independence. The novel shows that "everything alive consists of others, and nothing lives alone" (Powers, 2018, p. 384), indicating that all life depends on constant cooperation among organisms and within ecological systems. Such knowledge helps us understand that there is no such thing as an independent self, because everything depends on something else. Ethical implications of such a perception of reality emerge when the novel says that "to think of the world as a web means that everything you do sends out ripples into infinity" (Powers, 2018, p. 401). In this regard, human actions have a much broader scope because they affect the entire ecosystem of which humans are a part. Environmental devastation is not only damage done to the environment but also a violation of the interrelated system that includes humans.

Using the stories of characters like Olivia Vandergriff, Nicholas Hoel, Patricia Westerford, and Adam Appich, Powers shows that ecological awareness arises through engagement with the environment. The spiritual awakening of Olivia after her brush with death, Nick's years-long observation of the chestnut tree, Patricia's scientific work, and Adam's activism all point to the various ways people can realise their ecological interconnectedness. Together, these stories prove the novel's main thesis: that humans need to recognize the connections between all things to survive.

Table 4.4

Quotations Illustrating Human-Nature Interconnectedness and Ecological Consciousness in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*

Quotation	Contextual Significance	Page
"There are no individuals. There are not even separate species. Everything is connected."	Rejects the biological and philosophical concept of individualism by presenting all forms of life as fundamentally interconnected.	p. 356
"A tree is a community of lives."	Presents the tree as a complex ecological community sustained by multiple interconnected life forms rather than as a single isolated organism.	p. 84

“The world is a web, not a ladder.”	Challenges hierarchical views of existence by presenting ecological relationships as interconnected and mutually dependent.	p. 401
“We are brief patterns in a vast and ancient web.”	Emphasises the temporary nature of human existence within ecological systems that extend far beyond human history.	p. 370
“Every living thing is made of others, and nothing is alone.”	Highlights the biological and ecological reality that all living organisms depend upon cooperation and interconnected relationships.	p. 384
“To see the world as a web is to see that every action ripples outward forever.”	Demonstrates the ethical responsibility arising from ecological interconnectedness by showing that every human action affects the broader environment.	p. 401

4.5 Theme 5: Environmental Activism as Resistance to Ecological Destruction

In “*The Overstory*,” Richard Powers views environmental activism not as some idealistic or romantic pursuit but rather as an ethical response to the ecological disaster happening on the planet. Environmental activism is seen as an extremely difficult and often painful commitment that demands sacrifices from activists in terms of their personal comfort, social acceptance, and even physical safety. In Richard Powers’ view, environmental activism develops quite naturally from ecological awareness, since the realisation of the interdependence of all living beings entails a certain moral obligation to preserve them.

Those environmental activists mentioned in the novel, such as Olivia Vandergriff, Nicholas Hoel, Adam Appich, and others, are embodiments of those who refuse to remain apathetic towards environmental injustice. These characters oppose political, legal, and economic mechanisms that ignore or even legalise the destruction of forests. Olivia’s belief in this struggle is evident in her words: “We are here to give a voice to the voiceless” (Powers, 2018, p. 315). In this statement, the character symbolically represents the ethical and moral representation of those non-human creatures that cannot speak for themselves in human society. Moreover, Powers emphasises that the true activist must be personally involved in the process. The novel mentions that “sometimes you have to put your body between the chainsaw and the tree” (Powers, 2018, p. 377). In this quote, the author shows that defending the environment sometimes demands physical courage and even personal sacrifice rather than merely a symbolic expression of concern. For example, Adam Appich recognises this necessity when he concludes that “the only way to make a difference is to act as if what you do matters” (Powers, 2018, p. 406).

Furthermore, Powers recognises the individual implications of environmental activism, in which activists are isolated, face legal consequences, become emotionally exhausted, and sometimes lose their lives. However, despite all this struggle, the novel shows that inaction and silence make ecology suffer even more. This is why, in this novel, we find the quote: “Resistance is not a choice. It is a necessity” (Powers, 2018, p. 388). This implies that it is our duty to protect nature, as it is ethical to do so. Nicholas Hoel also understands this deep aspect of activism in his observation that “It is not about saving the world. It is about being saved ourselves” (Powers, 2018, p. 348).

In conclusion, the book portrays environmental activism as something that transcends the current moment and as an indication of concern about future generations. In this regard, Powers shows that “They were fighting for a future they would never see” (Powers, 2018, p. 419). This point shows how selfless environmental activism is, given that the rewards for current actions

will be seen only by future generations. Through these stories, therefore, the author shows that activism is the ethical side of ecological interconnections and environmental stewardship. In advocating for trees and other endangered environments, the story's characters are not just concerned with preserving biodiversity. However, they are also concerned about preserving ecological interconnections.

Table 4.5

Quotations Illustrating Environmental Activism as Resistance to Ecological Destruction in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*

Quotation	Contextual Significance	Page
"We are here to give a voice to the voiceless."	Olivia's declaration symbolically extends moral representation to trees and other non-human forms of life that lack a voice within human institutions.	p. 315
"Sometimes you have to put your body between the chainsaw and the tree."	Illustrates environmental activism as an act of physical courage and personal sacrifice in defence of threatened ecosystems.	p. 377
"The only way to make a difference is to act as if what you do matters."	Demonstrates Adam's belief that ethical action should be guided by moral responsibility rather than the certainty of success.	p. 406
"Resistance is not a choice. It is a necessity."	Emphasises that environmental resistance is an ethical obligation because remaining passive enables ecological destruction.	p. 388
"It is not about saving the world. It is about being saved ourselves."	Suggests that environmental activism restores humanity's relationship with nature and transforms human understanding of ecological responsibility.	p. 348
"They were fighting for a future they would never see."	Highlights the intergenerational nature of environmental activism, emphasising sacrifice for future generations.	p. 419

5. Findings

The findings show that *The Overstory* depicts ecological grief as an emotionally complex experience that affects not only individual suffering but also collective environmental loss. It becomes clear from the stories of Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, Douglas Pavlicek, Winston Ma, and other characters that ecological grief arises from witnessing deforestation, biodiversity loss, and the disruption of ecological systems. Ecological grief is not portrayed as passive despair; rather, it is presented as an ethical consciousness that prompts individuals to reflect on their connection to nature. What is more, the analysis shows that ecological grief is inseparable from ecological responsibility, as people who feel attached to forests are motivated to fight environmental destruction and promote ecological preservation. Thus, the findings confirm previous studies on ecological grief as an actual psychological and cultural response to environmental issues and climate change (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018).

It also becomes clear from the analysis that forests serve as archives of environmental memory and store ecological knowledge across generations. Throughout the novel, trees are presented as archives that communicate, adapt, and transmit knowledge through ecological networks. It can thus be seen that environmental memory is both a biological and a cultural concept which transcends human time. This is evident from the significance of the chestnut tree, the mulberry tree of the Ma family, and the old redwoods. Forests, therefore, not only hold ecological history but also the collective cultural memory of a people. Thus, the deforestation of such forests

amounts to the destruction of both biodiversity and environmental knowledge, which once destroyed cannot be regained.

Moreover, Powers' work demonstrates that he questions anthropocentric premises by ascribing agency, intellect, and communicability to trees and forest communities. Through Powers' work, trees are perceived as active agents participating in ecological processes rather than passive elements to be utilised by humans. Thus, Powers' depiction of trees redefines ecological consciousness by highlighting the interconnectedness of all living beings and dismissing the notion of a hierarchy that places humans above other creatures. The development of ecological consciousness of Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, Nicholas Hoel, and Douglas Pavlicek exemplifies the idea that ecological consciousness stems from understanding that people rely on ecological relations. In this way, the ecocentric philosophy, which promotes cooperation, coexistence, and an environmental ethic rather than domination and exploitation, is advanced. Such a thesis aligns with contemporary ecocritical studies that call for acknowledging the agency of the more-than-human world and criticising anthropocentric approaches (Haraway, 2016).

Lastly, it can be established that environmental activism in *The Overstory* is an active form of environmental grief and environmental memory. In other words, the fact that characters actively participate in protecting nature shows that ecological awareness is about responsibility, not just about observation. Thus, through his characters' activism, Powers shows that it is a responsibility to future generations that makes one protect forests and, hence, ecological memory and biodiversity. All in all, these findings show that ecological grief and environmental memory go hand in hand, providing an ecocritical approach to the novel. Therefore, based on the analysis, it can be concluded that ecological grief and environmental memory are interdependent concepts that help create the novel's ecocritical vision. Through them, *The Overstory* makes readers understand that forests are alive and must be protected. These conclusions align with recent research that views the novel as an important part of climate fiction and the environmental humanities (Banerjee & Paul, 2026).

6. Conclusion

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* shows how ecological grief and environmental memory are crucial to understanding the intricate relationship between humans and the natural world. Through the characters' interlinked experiences, the novel demonstrates that environmental degradation not only leads to ecological devastation but also to tremendous emotional, cultural, and ethical damage. By portraying forests as archives of memory and trees as integral members of interconnected ecological communities, the author rejects the anthropocentric approach and promotes an ecocentric perspective on the environment grounded in interdependence, responsibility, and justice. The results of this study show that ecological grief plays a key role in raising environmental awareness and encouraging people to protect the environment. In contrast, environmental memory emphasises the need to preserve forests as repositories of biological and cultural heritage. Hence, *The Overstory* makes an important contribution to contemporary ecocriticism by showing how crucial it is to protect nature because of its intrinsic value, agency, and historicity.

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