

Anthropocene Through The Lens of Richard Powers The Overstory

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Abstract: Literature plays a pivotal role in sculpting human life. It empowers the person to obtain, learn, and inspire the society in a better way. The different genres of literature help to explore the authentic concerns encountered by mankind. It narrates beyond the tales of human life and serves as a powerful medium to portray humanity's most pressing concerns. The most concerning struggle of humans at the present is climate change and its' consequences. Because of this, slowly, we are entering into the Anthropocene epoch because of the human activities against environment on the earth. This may seem like the problem of the ecologists and environmentalists, but it is also interconnected with the literature of various languages. It is a known fact that on numerous occasions' literature helps us to explore the complex, multifaceted connections between human existence and the environment. Many times, literature inspires critical reflection, raises awareness, and encourages action. The present paper aims to bring out the environmental issues and repercussions represented in the Richard Powers The Overstory and how American literary works helps in analyzing, predicting, and visualizing the environmental related issues in real life.

Keywords: Anthropocene Epoch, Anthropocene, Literary canon, and repercussions.

Introduction: Literature is the powerful medium to weave a spell of wonder with human experience; it helps to envision the future of a society in a clear way. Starting from the classical works to modern literary works, the literature addresses any of the issue prevailing during the time of publication. In recent days, the entire community is struggling to find proper balance in the climate. As a result, there is a rapid change in weather, production of food, lifecycle of wildlife and the well-being of human beings. In literature many writers have started to write climate-oriented themes in their writings. Like ecologists the literary authors are also trying to provide solutions for achieving eco-friendly practices in their works. The term "climate change" is not a simple phrase; it encompasses the entire spectrum of life, from the blooming flowers of growth to the final whispers of mortality. Particularly, American literature offers a lens to examine the intricacies of climate change and its impact on human societies and the natural world.

"What is wonderful about great literature is that it transforms the man who reads it towards the condition of the man who wrote"—E. M. Forster.

As per the English novelist E. M. Forster, Literature has the power in reshaping the society. The authors of American literature have a distinguished place among other literatures in portraying the genres of Anthropocene and climate change fictions. From classical to modern writing, the American literary writers foster the awareness of environmental issues and the impact of industrialization in their writing. This is because of the country's pioneering exploration in industrialization and urbanization. American literary writers always try to explore both the repercussions and restorative measures for a healthy existence. The rich traditions of exploring environmental themes have been observed in various American literary works because of the pioneering industrialization that happened in the society.

Environment and Classical Literature:

The classical novels Walden, The Grapes of Wrath, My Antonia, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, etc., bind the importance of the human relationship with nature and the prevailing disconnection that happening between nature and human beings in the name of civilization. The novels portray not only the sociological aspects but also depict the psychological tensions faced by the middle-class families, farmers and naturalists of the society. At times the writers also infuse cognitive impacts caused by climate change, including cognitive dissonance, environmental denial, and climate fatalism. The novels The Grapes of Wrath, The Stranger, and The Catcher in the Rye visualize the social isolation and disconnection from the community. On the other hand, the novels The Sound and the Fury, A Thousand Acres, and The Corrections explore the complex relationships and conflicts that arise within the family because of climate change as a sign of betrayal done by the older generations on younger generation. Thus, through the examples it is eminent that the American literature is a pioneer in representing environmental related issues.

Anthropocene epoch in American Literature:

The Anthropocene epoch is the emerging theme in much of the writing because of the ecological crisis alarming all over the world. The term Anthropocene is associated with the Greek word anthropos, meaning human, and 'kainos', meaning new. The current era is unofficially referred to as the Anthropocene epoch because of the impact of the human activities done against nature which affects the root of the environment. The present article titled Anthropocene through the Lens of Richard Powers The Overstory tries to explore the ecological footprints made by human in the name of modernism. It also analyzes the tribulations and interconnectedness of human

beings with nature. The global writing community still believes that the portrayal of these themes in literature will create a kind of transformation in the forthcoming era.

Modern American literary era saw a surge in ecological consciousness, advocating for environmental protection. Although many works in American Literature represent climate change-related issues some tried to explore the reason behind the destruction of geological construction of the environment. Through the novel *Spring Silent*, Richard Carson tried to exhibit the side effects of using pesticides on farmlands. Carson evidently explained the health hazards caused by the pesticides in farmlands. Another work titled “*Dessert Solitaire*” by Edward Abbey exhibits the experience of a park ranger in the American Southwest. The hero of the novel loves to protect the wild beauty of the landscapes of the desert and dedicated his entire life to preserving the wilderness of the desert. Through the character, Abbey tries to create awareness on deconstructing activities against nature. These works are considered to be the pioneers to brazen out the cause for the Anthropocene epoch. The industrial revolution and technological advancements are primary reasons for the climatic change. These changes are expressed in science fiction novels where imaginary or envisioning themes exist to stress the importance of holding control over the detrimental human influence. The *Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi, *New York 2140* by Kim Stanley Robinson, *Flight Behaviour* by Barbara Kingsolver, *The Overstory* by Richard Powers, and *Hummingbird Salamander* by Jeff Vandermeer are examples of the imaginary warning themes on climate change, which unfortunately turning into reality.

As per the scientific study conducted by a team of researchers from NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Southern California and Rutgers University in New Jersey, it was identified that parts of New York City are sinking inch by inch every day. The leading postdoctoral researcher, Brett Buzzanga, said, “We have produced such a detailed map of vertical land motion in the New York City area that there are features popping out that haven’t been noticed before.”. The prediction of rising sea levels was already informed in the novel *New York 2140* in 2017. The study was conducted in 2023; this is a real example that literature always envisions the future. Another important issue faced by the people in America is wildfire. This affects countless numbers of living organisms, including human beings. Scientists in their studies about wildfires state that climate change has boosted the whiplash conditions in the middle of the 20th century. The term whiplash refers to the condition in weather, particularly the unstable condition of four seasons. ² For example, California had experienced continuous heavy rainfall in the years 2022 and 2023, but the entire scenario changed in the autumn winter of 2024 to extreme dry conditions, which turned the luscious green forest to dried woods ready for auto ignites. Professor Stefan Doerr, Director of the Centre for Wildfire Research at Swansea University, has stated that “California has seen some of the most significant increases in the length and extremity of the fire weather season globally in recent decades, driven largely by climate change.”

The novels *The Windup Girl* by Paolo Bacigalupi and *Aurora* by Kim Stanley Robinson already explored the consequences of climate change in the form of floods, landslides, and wildfires in the years 2009 and 2015. Once again, the scientific research in the year 2025 made it clear that literature is not just an imagination; it is the prediction of future events based on real-life experiences.

Anthropocene through Richard Powers *The Overstory*:

Among the American writers in the modern age, the most eloquent, Richard Powers, is known for his vivid imaginary and inspirational representation of nature in his works. For his elegant writing, the novelist received the Pulitzer Prize in the year 2019 for the novel “*The Overstory*.” He is a versatile writer, depicting magical realism, environmental issues, philosophical concepts, and scientific approaches in many of his works. The writer is best known for his complex ideas on science and philosophy. Powers work always tries to address environmental issues like climate change, pollution, the interconnectedness of humans with nature, and human exceptionalism. Through the novel *The Overstory*, Richard explores the beauty and importance of the connection of trees with nature. The way nature addresses human beings and the traits to identify the communication between trees and humans are beyond the admiration in the novel.

“In Nature nothing is perfect and everything is perfect. Trees can be contorted, Bend in weird ways and they’re still beautiful” – Alice Walker.

As per the quote, trees and other living organisms in the world are unique. It is a known fact that forests play a significant role in nourishing the environment with green meadows and protecting many species on the earth. All the living organisms in the world are interconnected with nature in one way or the other. But human beings are the only living organisms that suppress or show superiority over other living and non-living things for leading a cozier life. The degradation of the ecosystem started with the exploration of human traits on the earth. Many species were destroyed, and many were completely erased away in the name of civilization. But the entire blame is on nature and not on the humans, and indirectly this is the reason for welcoming the Anthropocene age. In the name of civilization, man started to cut trees and plants to expand his opulence. Naturally, deforestation is the first deconstruction implemented by humans, and that too not in one or two months; it started thousands of years ago. From the role of hunter-gatherers to settled agricultural communities, man has transformed the entire universe for his comfort and convenience. By cutting down trees and demolishing the green meadows man has

expanded his border in the name of urbanization that results in deforestation. The term 'deforestation' is cutting down trees of forests for commercial purposes. As a result, people all around the world are victimizing rapid changes in biodiversity, climate, the life cycle of living things, the water cycle, and increased greenhouse gas emissions. The change has affected the entire geological structure of the land. Particularly, the forest land of the United States has been affected by extreme weather in recent days. The forest is considered to be the world's fourth largest forest, encompassing approximately 8% of global forests.

The forest covers almost one third of the country's total area, though the country was exposed to frequent floods, hurricanes, tornados, wildfires, ice storm etc., The government is implementing many ways to protect and preserve the forests for the healthy sustainability of the earth's ecological system. The government is frequently implementing changes in the rules and regulations for protecting the natural resource. But the change should happen from every individual on the earth, every citizen of the country should think about the future generations and their healthy sustainability. As a responsible citizen many American writers started highlighting the issues in their works. The representation of the climate-change oriented theme reflected not only in modern writing but also in classical novels. Some of the important and notable classical novels of American literature are *The Scarlet Letter*, *Walden*, *The Virginian*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *A Sand County Almanac* and so many. These literary works focused on the importance of reforestation and preservation of natural resources.

The recent novel *The Overstory* is an elegant novel representing the intricate relationship between the nature and human beings. Through the nine characters, the author tries to explore the ecological balance of ecosystems through innovative concepts. The story binds multiple characters and concepts weaving together the human experience for centuries and the prevailing environmental awareness. It also highlights the devastating impact of human activities like clear-cutting of trees and the expansion of cities and urban areas which leads to ecosystem disruption. In the novel trees has been symbolized to represent Anthropocene theme. According to the author trees are the forefathers' holding memories of billion years representing the beautiful interconnectedness of human with nature.

"Old trees are our parents, and our parents' parents, perchance. If you would learn the secrets of Nature, you must practice more humanity..."(p. 5, *The Overstory*)

Richard Powers:

The characters in the novel also believe that trees are forefathers representing the tales of their ancestors. Through the lines, Powers uses non-human narrative by cantering trees. Richards clearly states the importance of preserving forests to maintain ecological balance and proper carbon sequestration.

Trees are the central theme of the story, even the content of the story is divided into roots, trunk, crown and seeds. All the characters in the novel relate to the trees in different ways. Neelay Mehta, one of the brilliant and creative characters in the story helps the readers to identify their interconnectedness with the nature. He is the one who helps Patricia Westerford a young researcher to identify and analyse the deciphering tree language. As a computer scientist he invented a revolutionary video game simulating the growth, ways and the benefit of protecting trees. The invention of eco based video games may be a funny idea, but his targeted audience is the younger generation. He believes that through the game people will at least assume, learn and imagine the beauty of green luscious world and the importance of protecting it. His imagination expands like:

"There are trees that spread like fireworks and trees the rise like cones. Trees that shoot without a ripple, three hundred feet straight skyward. Broad, pyramidal, rounded, columnar, conical, crooked the only thing they do in common is branch, like Vishnu waving his many arms. Among those spreaders, the wildest are the figs." (p. 119, *The Overstory*)

Through the character, Richard has seeded the positive hope and prevailing change among human beings against deforestation. The video game invention will not make any drastic change in global warming, but it helps millions of younger generations to understand the complex impact of climate change and it enables them to compare and put a hold on the deconstructing activities. He believes it will create a kind of awareness about protecting and nurturing the nature. In the year 2022, Mr. Sam Baratt UN Environment's Chief of education and youth and advocacy introduced the concept 'Playing for the Planet Alliance' in the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit. The concept seems to be a useless one, but it results in 60,000 pledges signed for the UN campaigns and \$800,000 were made as donations to different charities working with the environmental causes. By analysing the study, it is understood that literature and literary writers always studies and predicts the situation a step ahead.

Another interesting character in the novel is, Patricia Westerford. She is a dendrophile by nature and a botanist by profession helps to conserve forest and involves herself in doing research on trees. Through this character, Richard reveals that trees too have the power of communicating. According to him, fungi and roots are the words used by trees for their communication. The character deeply connects the feelings and emotions of human beings with trees. Her blind love for the forests can be observed in the following lines:

"We all travel the Milky Way together, trees and men.... In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks. The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness." (p. 156, *The Overstory*)

Patricia's perception about trees is not a daydream, as per the scientific article published in 2021 on the topic "Trees talk to each other. 'Mother Tree' Ecologists hears lessons for people, too", the professor from the University of British Columbia, Ms. Suzanne Simard stated that trees are social creatures, and they send information through the network of fungi that resembles like the neural connections in the human brain. She admitted it is admirable to see trees pass the information through their roots, trunks and branches. Thus, through the character Patricia Powers justify the characters weaved on environment.

Followed by Patricia Westerford, Powers introduces another appealing character named Olivia Vandergriff, a Gen Z activist known for her charismatic leadership qualities. The character symbolizes the role of youngsters in transforming the techno world to a green world. Nicholas Hoel, the most significant character of the novel, has a mysterious connection with a chestnut tree planted by his father. He always believes that the tree has deep emotion and iconic importance. Through the character, Richard highlights the stress-affecting factors that prevail between human needs and the natural world. Mimi Ma, Douglas Pavlicek, Adam Appich, Marie Green, and Werner Hochmuth are the other characters who delve deeply into representing the lives of humans and trees in exploring the complexities and challenges of activism and the role of the individual in overcoming the environmental crisis.

It is a renowned fact that trees are the backbone of the earth's ecosystem. It helps human not only in curing diseases and but also to attain the state of 'mindfulness. The picture of dense forest with different types of trees with unique feature is changing slowly. Because of geological changes, most of the tree varieties are at risk.

The Anthropocene is a geological condition experienced by the mother earth in relation to climate and other environmental transformations. The novel "The Overstory" masterfully represents the Anthropocene elements through various narrative threads, characters, and symbolic representations. The novel tries to identify the factors affecting the harmony of nature with respect to the Anthropocene view. The reader can understand the issues affecting the geology of the earth in the novel through human exploitation of natural resources just to fulfil the necessity without understanding the after effect of the depletion of the forests. The characters in the novel initially neglect the nature's significance then later analyses and suggest solutions for the devastating transformation of the environment. Patricia Westerford in the novel tries to explore how nature spreads its society:

"Forests mend and shape themselves through subterranean synapses. And in shaping themselves, they shape, too, the tens of thousands of other, linked creatures that form it from within. Maybe it's useful to think of forests as enormous spreading, branching, underground super-trees (p. 273, The Overstory).

Patricia also quotes the importance of the bonding between nature and human beings through, "The biochemical behaviour of individual trees may make sense only when we see them as members of a community" (p. 158)

Conclusion:

Thus, it is the responsibility of every living thing on the earth to reconnect the chain of sustainability. Powers reflects that the self-centred activities of human beings on earth are the primary cause for the environmental issues. It includes increase in population, consumption of natural resources, Industrialization and technological advancements, lack of environmental awareness and education and societal structures. This prioritization of human needs leads to suppress the other living things on the planet. If this discrimination continues, the author says that the earth will not give space for any living things. No one can imagine a world without plants, trees, and other living organisms; even man is depending on other species for his survival. Depending on natural resources for the wellbeing is not an issue, but we should consider the nature as god's gift. No one likes to destroy the gift given by the loved ones. Thus, through the lens of Richard Powers readers can understand how literature connects real life issues and the cause for Anthropocene epoch. The paper indirectly stresses the importance of afforestation, the need for pollution reduction, the eco-friendly connection with nature, and the mutual respect for other living things.

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End Notes:

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