

## REPRESENTATIONS OF CLIMATE ANXIETY IN RICHARD POWERS' THE OVERSTORY

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### ABSTRACT

The research analyzes how Richard Powers portrays climate anxiety in *The Overstory* through an ecocritical framework. The research investigates the emotional and psychological challenges which eight main characters Patricia Westerford, Nick Hoel, Olivia Vandergriff, Douglas Pavlicek, Adam Appich, Neelay Mehta, Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly experience because of ecological destruction. The characters in the story display different emotional reactions which reflect the ecological crisis through their feelings of fear and guilt and despair and deep anxiety. The research bases its analysis on the rising literary interest in psychological effects of climate change. The research aims to study climate anxiety representation in the novel while demonstrating how ecocriticism helps reveal its complex ethical and emotional aspects. The research employs qualitative methods and thorough textual analysis to demonstrate how multiple narrative perspectives in the novel allow readers to experience environmental crisis through different personal and ethical perspectives. Through its narrative *The Overstory* prompts readers to reevaluate their natural relationships while showing how literary works can both convey and strengthen shared emotional responses to climate anxiety.

**Keywords** : climate anxiety, ecocritical approach, *The Overstory*

### INTRODUCTION

From a far-off scientific argument to a current, personal, and emotionally real experience impacting people all around the world, climate change has developed. The growing frequency of environmental calamities, biodiversity loss, and ecological deterioration has given rise to a psychological condition known as climate anxiety—a chronic fear or emotional distress caused by the awareness of environmental destruction and the future of the planet. The American Psychological Association (APA & ecoAmerica, 2017) states that climate anxiety is especially common among the younger generation, who are projected to

experience the longrun ramifications of present ecological disasters. In addition to being covered in psychology, this rising emotional phenomena has started to show up in a number of cultural manifestations, including literature. Literature captures and writes people's lives in specific eras and areas (Yudith et al., 2024). Especially fiction gives a special venue to consider ecological damage and to convey shared emotional reactions to worldwide catastrophes.

Literary works serve as manifestations of each author's vision and records of cultural events in the past (Yudith et al., 2023). Literary works are one way for readers and students to understand the lives and backgrounds of different characters in a story (Abdollah et al., 2025). One literary work that profoundly examines this theme is *The Overstory* (2018), a novel by American author Richard Powers. The book weaves together a vibrant mosaic of people whose lives are changed by their relationships to trees and environment. Renowned for combining science, philosophy, and fantasy, Powers challenges anthropocentric perspectives with *The Overstory* and raises questions about humanity's ethical obligation to the environment. Further highlighting its worldwide acclaim and relevance, the book won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Powers' capacity to mix emotional depth with environmental awareness makes the book a great topic for investigating the psychological effects of climate change in literature.

The study uses ecocriticism as its major theoretical lens to investigate this problem. Ecocriticism, a literary technique, examines how books portray the natural environment, environmental crises, and the human-nature connection (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Garrard, 2012). It enables scientists to examine how literary works represent ethical quandaries, concerns, and ecological ideals. Ecocriticism is used in this study to examine how *The Overstory* shows climate concerns via characterization, storytelling structure, and emotional expression. The hypothesis enables the discovery of underlying significance in the characters' reactions to environmental collapse by concentrating on the psychological and ecological aspects of the book. Consequently, this study aims to investigate how Richard Powers portrays climate anxiety in *The Overstory* via the emotional and psychological events of its main characters.

## METHOD

This study tries to investigate how Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* portrays climate anxiety using a qualitative method with a literary descriptive analysis technique. This research highlights the interpretation of meaning, emotions, and ethical concerns surrounding environmental problems instead than concentrating on statistical data. The study, carried out by the researcher alone at home employing digital access to pertinent theoretical sources and literature, was conducted during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The main topic of this research is *The Overstory*, originally released in 2018 by W.W. Norton & Company, with special attention on eight main characters Patricia Westerford,

Nick Hoel, Olivia Vandergriff, Douglas Pavlicek, Adam Appich, Neelay Mehta, Ray Brinkman, and Dorothy Cazaly each of whom shows different forms of climate anxiety. Because of their obvious relevance to the study's thematic emphasis, these characters were deliberately chosen. Close reading of the text, choosing passages that portray ecological distress, categorizing the data according to character attributes and environmental context, and interpreting the results through an ecocritical perspective comprised the research process. The main data comprise narrative excerpts, exchanges, and character descriptions; secondary data include theoretical books, journal articles, and prior research on ecocriticism and environmental literature. The researcher was the main instrument, aided by annotations and thematic coding programs to guarantee orderly data gathering and classification. Using thematic and situational interpretation, data analysis linked the results to the theoretical framework to study how the novel communicates psychological and moral reactions to environmental catastrophe. This process entailed finding symbols, feelings, and character arcs pertinent to the general ecological message of the book.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section offers the results and analysis of Richard Powers's portrayal of climate anxiety in *The Overstory*. The study targets character development, plot occurrences, and emotional reactions reflecting ecological harm throughout the book. Using an ecocritical viewpoint, the study looks at how different characters feel and show climate anxiety as a shared psychological and moral battle. The study uses literary evidence combined with theoretical ideas to go into depth on the study aims.

EXTRACT 1:

PATRICIA WESTERFORD

*"She hides for years, grieving for the things she sees that no one else can"*  
(Powers, 2018:112).

Patricia's emotional retreat following the rejection of her tree communication research by the scientific community is caught in this saying. Early indications of climate anxiety, including moral sadness, alienation, and mental anguish, are seen in her profound grief and isolation. Her character demonstrates how great psychological responses can be brought on by ecological fact when disregarded by society (APA, 2017:5).

EXTRACT 2:

NICK HOEL

*"He barely talks any longer. Though the trees speak all the time. (Powers, 2018:140).*

Following a family catastrophe, Nick withdraws and absorbs tree imagery in his art. Signs of ecological despair are his emotional detachment and fixation on

nature. This shows a psychological redirection of personal discomfort into environmental awareness, a habit connected with climate worry (Nguyen, 2021:89).

EXTRACT 3:

OLIVIA VANDERGRIF

*"I'm here for something else now. Something bigger than me" (Powers, 2018:153).*

After surviving electrocution, Olivia interprets the experience as a calling from nature and becomes intensely devoted to environmental activism. Her spiritual awakening and detachment from everyday life demonstrate a form of climate anxiety that manifests through radical eco-spiritualism, especially among youth (Garrard, 2012:88).

EXTRACT 4:

DOUGLAS PAVLICEK

*"I thought I was doing something good. Turns out, I was just another tool" (Powers, 2018:225).*

Douglas feels betrayed after learning that the trees he planted as a form of redemption are being cut down again. His disappointment and loss of purpose represent the psychological toll of systemic environmental failure an emotional collapse often associated with climate-related helplessness and disillusionment.

EXTRACT 5:

ADAM APPICH

*"He can't decide if these tree people are fanatics or if he's the one who's blind" (Powers, 2018:242).*

Though he approaches environmental activism with academic objectivity, Adam's inner conflict begins to grow. His doubt and confusion indicate the early stages of psychological struggle foreshadowing a deeper emotional transformation that aligns with the complexity of climate anxiety.

This research concludes that *The Overstory* by Richard Powers presents climate anxiety as a complex and shared emotional experience, expressed through the psychological and ethical struggles of its main characters. Using a qualitative ecocritical approach, the analysis reveals that climate anxiety is not depicted as a singular emotion, but rather as a spectrum of grief, guilt, disillusionment, and spiritual awakening triggered by environmental degradation. Characters such as Patricia, Nick, Olivia, Douglas, and Adam embody different stages of climate anxiety, shaped by personal trauma and their deepening connection to nature. The novel's multiperspective narrative and symbolic use of trees allow readers to reflect on the moral and emotional dimensions of the

climate crisis. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the power of fiction to humanize ecological issues, foster empathy, and deepen ecological awareness through literary representation.

## CONCLUSION

Based on this study, Richard Powers through the mental and emotional experiences of his characters, notably in the first half of *The Overstory*, Powers successfully captures climate anxiety. Every character's interaction with the surroundings reveals a spectrum of emotional responses, from terror and grief to regret and existential pondering, therefore highlighting the great human repercussions of environmental degradation. Using a multiperspective story structure, Powers shows climate concern as a shared and group emotional reality rather than a lonely or personal emotion. This study shows, using ecocritical analysis, that literature provides readers the chance to process their emotional responses and grow morally in addition to mirrors environmental disasters. Ultimately, this research offers a better grasp of how literature raises environmental awareness and prepares the ground for more study into the links between literature and ecological issues.

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