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## The Exploration of Therapeutic Ecology as a Cathartic Response to Environmental Anxiety

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### Abstract

In an era marked by mounting environmental problems and an increasing public consciousness of ecological emergencies, people are progressively contending with elevated environmental anxiety. This abstract presents a research project that inspects the therapeutic ecology as a cathartic reaction to address and mitigate the psychological effects of environmental distress. Therapeutic ecology is an interdisciplinary approach that acknowledges and explores the mutually reinforcing relationship between human well-being and our surroundings. Additionally, by utilizing the concepts of therapeutic ecology, and the potentiality of literature as a powerful tool for emotional expression and exploration, the study focuses on Richard Powers' iconic book *The Overstory*. The investigation aims to uncover the healing power within the narrative framework, character development, and ecological philosophy of the novel. It does so by portraying nature as a source of revival and emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living things. By drawing comparisons between the storylines in this book and actual environmental concerns, the book offers a creative haven where readers confront, process, and potentially alleviate their ecological concerns. Further, this research aims to examine how engaging with nature, participating in ecological activities, and promoting environmental well-being can help lighten environmental anxiety. Ultimately the goal is to establish a connection among psychology, ecology, and literature by offering a more profound comprehension of the therapeutic potential inherent in literary works that explore ecological themes, offering readers a nuanced understanding of the intricate and inevitable relationship between humanity and nature.

Keywords: Therapeutic Ecology, Environmental Anxiety, Literary Analysis, Cathartic Response, Environmental Well-being.

## Introduction

Environmental issues have occasionally gained importance, especially in literary works. The forest has been one of the most important natural features on Earth since the time of our ancestors. The conversion of forested areas into non-forested areas is the reason behind the terrible degradation of the environment. It has an impact on many facets of our planet, including forestry, biodiversity, and climate. This issue is exemplified in Richard Powers' magnum opus, *The Overstory*, which showcases the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the natural world. Richard Powers is a contemporary American author well-known for his complex and thought-provoking works that skillfully combine philosophy, science, and human experience. His first book, *Three Farmers on Their Way to Dance*, was published in 1985, and it immediately became critically acclaimed. Richard Powers has written on a variety of subjects, such as genetics, music, artificial intelligence, and, particularly, environmentalism. Among Powers' most well-known creations are *The Overstory*, which was released in 2018. In addition to its captivating story, the book has received a lot of attention and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2019. His unwavering dedication to examining the complexities of the human condition in the rapidly deteriorating environment has had a lasting impact on contemporary literature.

Richard Powers' novel is a magnificent piece of ecological literature that weaves the complexities of the characters' lives with the majesty of forests and the wisdom of trees. The book revolves around nine Americans, seemingly unrelated, who come together with a shared love for the environment and a common desire to stop the rapid deforestation happening worldwide. The narrative explores their various relationships with nature, ranging from activists

advocating for forests to individuals who find peace in the silent insight of trees. Divided into four sections titled "roots", "trunk", "crown", and "seeds," the novel mirrors the lifecycle of a tree. Its rich prose and intricate storytelling highlight the themes of environmentalism, the interconnectedness of all living things, and the impact of human actions on ecosystems. It also unravels how therapeutic ecology can function as a transformative agent, providing characters who are burdened with environmental anxiety with comfort and catharsis.

To support the research, the theory of Eco-criticism and Psychoanalytic theory is included. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach that studies the relationship between literature and the environment. It emerged in response to the increasing ecological concerns of the late 20th century and aims to analyze how literature represents and influences humanity's relationship with the natural world. With the world facing environmental challenges, ecocriticism becomes an important tool to examine the role of literature in shaping environmental consciousness, fostering environmental responsibility, and prompting contemplation about our place in the natural world. Ecocritical examination of the novel unequivocally delves into the intricate exploration of human connections with nature and trees, highlighting themes of environmental consciousness and the profound impact of human actions on ecosystems.

The psychoanalytic theory, which was first introduced by Sigmund Freud, provides a fundamental framework for understanding the complexities of human behavior and thought processes. In literary analysis, this theoretical approach focuses on the subconscious motivations and psychological nuances of characters, which can offer profound insights into their actions and emotions. In terms of anxiety, psychoanalytic theory explores the

deep recesses of the human psyche, revealing the intricate interplay between conscious fears and subconscious conflicts. By integrating these methods, we can analyze how the novel deals with both environmental and psychological aspects in its portrayal of therapeutic ecology. This interdisciplinary approach enables us to gain a deeper understanding of how the characters respond to environmental challenges and how their interactions with nature can have therapeutic benefits.

### **Character Profiles: Environmental Anxiety and Therapeutic Experiences**

Environmental anxiety is the increasing worries and uncertainties about the condition of the environment that cause psychological and emotional distress. It is a phenomenon where people may feel overburdened, upset, or even afraid about pollution, deforestation, climate change, and biodiversity loss. A common cause for such anxiety is understanding the detrimental effects that human activity has on the environment, which can leave an individual feeling hopeless or depressed about the state of the environment in the future. It is influenced by various factors, such as awareness of ecological crises, media coverage of environmental issues, and a sense of guilt or responsibility for one's ecological impact. When it comes to environmental issues, a therapeutic experience is any activity or interaction that fosters mental recovery, physical health, and a sense of connection to the natural world. The goal of therapeutic encounters is to improve a person's mental health by addressing environmental anxiety.

*The Overstory* is a novel that delves into the complex relationship between environmental concerns and the healing power of nature. The book follows a set of characters, each with a unique connection to trees and the natural world, which serves as a source of comfort, empowerment, and transformation to them. Through their experiences, the novel

highlights the impact of environmental destruction on mental health and how people can find solace in nature. By exploring the inner workings of the characters' experiences with nature, the novel reveals the connections between human psychology and the environment. One of the protagonists, Patricia Westerford is a highly accomplished scientist whose research focus is on the study of trees. Despite being born deaf and having a speech disorder, she made significant strides in her field. Her father, Bill, instilled in her an early love for trees and all growing things, which has been instrumental in shaping her career path. As an adjunct professor in Wisconsin, her research has centered around the communication and cooperation among trees, highlighting the profound interconnectedness of the natural world. Her best-selling book, "The Secret Forest," offers insights into her ecological revelations and therapeutic communion with nature, which she has used as a catalyst for environmental advocacy. In addition to her research, Patricia leads a project to collect seeds from trees worldwide and store them in a vault to preserve them from the mass extinction she sees as inevitable. She is known to prefer the company of trees and nature to humans, and in the novel, she serves as Richard Powers' main vehicle for scientific arguments about the value of forests and the relationship between trees and humans.

Douglas Pavlicek and Mimi Ma, two environmental activists experience a mental conflict with environmental concerns. During his time in the Vietnam War, Douglas joined the U.S. Air Force and was injured while in combat. A large banyan fig tree came to his aid, but he sustained a leg injury in the process. Upon returning to the United States, he was disheartened to see the clearing forests in Oregon. In response, he began planting Doug-fir seedlings in the logged lands, which gave him a newfound sense of purpose. His character is notable for his close affinity with nature,

preferring the company of trees to people. However, when Mimi recognizes the sacrifices, he has made for her, she realizes that his heart is as pure and noble as the wood he loves. This narrative highlights the complex relationship between humans and the natural world, as well as the transformative power of environmental activism. Mimi Ma is the daughter of Winston Ma, a Chinese immigrant, and another protagonist of the novel. The fight to save the trees becomes personal for Mimi when the city cuts down a pine grove outside her office in Portland, Oregon. Witnessing the destruction of forests and the ruthless exploitation of natural resources, Douglas and Mimi channel their anxiety into radical activism. The act of resistance becomes a form of therapeutic catharsis, an assertion of agency in the face of despair.

Next on the list, is Olivia Vandergriff, whose character goes through a significant transformation in the story. In the beginning, she is an immature and reckless young woman from a privileged background who is suffering an existential crisis. One night, she is electrocuted by a faulty wall socket, and her heart stops for a whole minute. After she wakes up, she feels like a different person. Olivia believes that mysterious beings of light visited her during her unconscious state and left her with a message. She eventually realizes that the beings want her to join a group of activists who are trying to save the old redwoods from being logged. Olivia after the realization, lives in a tree-saving camp among the branches of a giant redwood tree called Mimas for almost a year. As she adjusts to her new way of life, Olivia becomes a holy figure to others. She feels a spiritual connection with the trees and communicates with them. Olivia's transformation represents the potential to have a powerful spiritual connection with nature and how it can positively change one's life. The awakening in her life serves as a potent antidote to her initial anxiety, offering a renewed sense of

purpose and connection. However, the failure of her hopes and tragic death present a pessimistic view of humanity's future.

Another character, Nick Hoel, is a photographer and has a deep connection with trees, which is rooted in his familial heritage. Through his photographic documentation of a chestnut tree, he captures the essence of time, growth, and interconnectedness, which can be seen as a sublime form of eco-consciousness. Nick is a creative and reflective individual from Iowa, with a lineage tracing back to immigrants from Norway and Ireland. Despite his family's farming tradition, he chose to pursue a career as an artist, specializing in tree-related sketches and sculptures while studying in Chicago. Tragically, Nick's family passed away in a gas leak accident, leaving him alone in the family home to work on his art. Nick's circumstances led him to spend almost a year living in a Redwood tree with Olivia, which became a sacred and joyous period for him. However, his happiness was short-lived as Olivia perished in a fire, leaving Nick feeling lost and shattered. Despite the hardships he faced, Nick continued to create activist art and documentaries on trees which demonstrated how art can be used to change people's perspectives and make the world a better place. Nick's artistic engagement serves as a therapeutic outlet, transforming his environmental anxiety into a creative expression that reflects the enduring resilience of nature.

Adam, a psychologist, plays a crucial role in exploring the psychological dimensions of environmental anxiety and the potential for therapeutic experiences through engagement with nature. He helps readers understand the emotional landscapes of the characters, offering a nuanced understanding of the psychological impact of environmental challenges. Adam recognizes the therapeutic value of engaging with the natural world when he observes patients who exhibit a unique affinity for trees. During one of the group therapy sessions held



outdoors, participants, enveloped by the serenity of a natural setting, shared their anxieties and fears related to environmental degradation. This therapeutic setting becomes a catalyst for emotional release and connection, illustrating how nature serves as a powerful medium for addressing psychological distress. Adam's insights and advocacy for therapeutic ecology contribute to the novel's overarching exploration of the profound interplay between the human psyche, environmental anxiety, and the transformative potential inherent in our connections with nature.

Upon analysis of the character profiles, it becomes evident that each protagonist embarks on a distinct emotional trajectory in response to environmental challenges. Richard Powers expertly weaves their stories together to illuminate the diverse ways in which characters cope with anxiety and find solace in therapeutic engagements with the natural world. These characters serve as conduits for the exploration of complex emotions, ranging from existential angst to transformative healing. The novel invites individuals to consider not only the characters' journeys but also our relationships with the environment and the cathartic possibilities that nature may offer amidst ecological issues.

#### **A comparative examination of real-world Therapeutic Ecological Practices**

The ever-changing relationship between humanity and the natural world has led to a disconnection that affects both the external and internal aspects of the human experience. The withdrawal from nature has resulted in humans losing touch with their inner selves. It is widely recognized that the restorative and healing effects of nature can positively impact both the psychological and physiological levels of human beings. This understanding has given rise to a strong faith in the healing power of nature, which can be traced back to ancient times when communities lived

in harmony with nature. Persistent fear of natural catastrophes and environmental threats, such as pollution, deforestation, extinction of species, and climate change leads to eco-anxiety. As the effects of environmental degradation become more apparent, a lot of people experience feelings of overwhelming and impending doom. Therapeutic practices for ecological concern are an essential aspect of improving mental health, connection with nature, and environmental protection.

In the interplay between fiction and reality, a comparative analysis between the recuperative ecology practices depicted in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and the tangible interventions found in real-world ecotherapy is explored. The main characters in the novel find solace, healing, and a sense of purpose through profound connections with trees and the natural world. A vital cornerstone in the fight against eco-anxiety is the connection to nature, which provides people with a therapeutic means of navigating the complexity of ecological reality. Engaging in natural environments through activities like forest bathing has been demonstrated to lower cortisol levels, alleviate stress, and improve well-being. In addition, wilderness therapy makes use of the space found in natural settings to create healing environments that promote resilience, and self-discovery. People who participate in outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, and introspection in the natural environment frequently report increased self-awareness, enhanced coping strategies, and a feeling of empowerment which mirrors the cathartic responses to environmental anxiety depicted in the novel through Patricia's ecological epiphany, where her scientific finding of the complex communication between trees becomes a healing experience that gives her comfort and a reason to fight for the environment.

By encouraging emotional healing via gardening and plant cultivation, horticulture therapy puts people in close contact with the

natural world. Empirical research suggests that engaging with plants can mitigate the signs of anxiety and depression while augmenting general health. This practical application applies to characters like Nick in *The Overstory*, whose creative involvement with trees turns into a healing medium that provides a way of expressing himself and cultivating a close bond with the natural world. He finds that capturing the spirit of trees is a cathartic process that helps him communicate the grandeur of the natural world while encouraging a closer bond with them. Environmental education and awareness are essential parts of the fight against eco-anxiety. These awareness initiatives provide people with information and a sense of purpose by encouraging a deeper comprehension of ecological issues and possible solutions. People who experience anxiety can channel that energy into combating environmental issues. This is apparent in the main characters of the book such as Douglas and Mimi Ma, who use their environmental anxiety as a fuel for activism and advocacy, helping to move society more broadly in the direction of ecological conservation. A significant medium for lowering eco-anxiety that transcends traditional forms of communication to elicit strong feelings and motivate action is artistic expression. Environmental artists, Olivia Vandergriff in *The Overstory*, employ artistic expression to convey the pressing importance of ecological concerns, cultivating a sentimental bond between people and the environment.

Ultimately, the ability of nature to heal and lessen eco-anxiety is a multifaceted and interconnected phenomenon. Therapeutic ecology is a comprehensive approach that aims to reduce the emotional burdens associated with ecological issues. It draws inspiration from both real-world practices and literature. Although there are some differences between the novel and real-world practices, the core premise of therapeutic ecology remains the same - nature is a powerful tool for healing the human psyche.

### **Symbolism of Nature and trees concerning Therapeutic Ecology:**

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* is a remarkable examination of the deep symbiosis between humans and the natural world within the complex literary tapestry. The research delves into the core of therapeutic ecology, where nature and trees have strong symbolic meanings of interconnectedness and healing. The study explores the therapeutic benefits of connecting with nature in light of growing ecological concerns, drawing comparisons between fact and fiction. When viewed through the ecocritical lens *The Overstory* allows us to examine the profound relationships between psychology, literature, and the pressing need for environmental consciousness.

Trees serve as resilient symbols in therapeutic ecology, their branches reaching toward the sky and their roots firmly planted in the ground. In the book, trees are portrayed as silent defenders who stand the test of time and weather storms. This symbolism encourages people to find strength in the durability of nature, implying that just like trees, the human spirit is innately adaptable to hardships in life. Beneath the surface, the vast networks of tree roots represent the interdependence of all life and the links to traditional knowledge. This symbolism is embraced by therapeutic ecology, which motivates people to trace their ancestry and find strength in the knowledge ingrained in it. Those in therapeutic settings are encouraged to connect with the core elements of their identity and draw from the vast reservoir of ancestral knowledge for healing, much as characters in the novel become entwined with the roots of ancient trees. Trees go through a life cycle where they grow from seed to maturity and back to seed, symbolizing the process of renewal and regeneration. Recognizing the cyclical nature of personal development and transformation is therapeutic ecology. The idea that humankind, similar to trees, has the innate ability for rejuvenation and restoration as well

as the progressive journey towards holistic well-being is further supported by the symbolism of the life cycle.

The forest canopy – where trees entwine to form a protective expanse providing a therapeutic environment becomes a representation of kinship and group support. This visual representation highlights the value of connected communities and nurturing surroundings in the healing process. Serving as a haven, the canopy lets people know they are not alone in their struggles, just like tree branches do. Curative ecology acknowledges the transformative power of shared experiences and collective strength, fostering a sense of support and belonging. This can be compared to the characters from the novel who are unrelated initially allies later because of their unified motive to save trees. In the work of fiction, the idea of trees exchanging messages through chemical signals is presented. This symbolic language goes beyond literal interpretation and is central to the field of therapeutic ecology. This symbolism emphasizes how crucial interpersonal relationships are to the therapeutic process. The therapeutic exchange that takes place when people connect with nature is metaphorically represented by the language of trees.

A story of recovery, development, and connection emerges from the symbolism of nature and trees within therapeutic ecology. Together, the idea of therapeutic ecology unveils a deep language ingrained in the natural world, a language that speaks to the human psyche and leads people on a healing path toward wholeness. Therapeutic ecology emerges as a testimony to the transformative power of nature's profound symbols in the ongoing narrative of human healing, as the symbols of resilience, roots, canopy, and the language of trees intertwine.

## **Conclusion**

As the investigation into therapeutic ecology as a cathartic response to environmental anxiety comes to a close, it is clear that the relationship between environmental consciousness, psychology, and literature offers a rich perspective to view the transformative potential of connecting with nature. *The Overstory* by Richard Powers goes beyond fiction and is a literary testimony to the healing power that comes from our connection to the natural world. The symbolic roots and trees represent resilience and interconnectedness, and so do the characters in the novel. These qualities are essential to therapeutic ecology and as they encounter environmental adversity, their travels demonstrate how humans can develop, adapt, and regenerate. Highlighting the deep connection between the human experience and the environment, the novel's nature symbolism does more than just provide a background; it also actively participates in the characters' cathartic reactions.

The similarities between the novel's imagined representations and verified ecotherapy results validate its contribution to a wider comprehension of nature's capacity for healing. To condense environmental anxiety, psychology, and ecology stresses the value of a strong sense of community, support networks, and a closer relationship with the natural world. People's relationship with nature highlights the importance of both ecological stewardship and the holistic well-being of individuals and communities. The therapeutic potential of bondage with nature becomes a guiding force, providing pathways for healing, resilience, and a revitalized ecological consciousness as people negotiate the complexities of environmental catastrophe.

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