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Echoes of the Forest: Eco-Mythology and Ecological Inheritance in *The Overstory* and *Greenwood*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to study the ecological themes and elements that deal with the concept of eco-mythology in Richard Powers' "*The Overstory*" and Michael Christie's "*Greenwood*". These texts interweave ecological themes with whimsical elements to root for contemporary environmental challenges. These novels portray forests and trees not merely as settings but as main characters with intense mythological significance, embodying life, forbearance, and the interrelation of all living creatures. Through the analysis of characters and their adaptations resulting from their communication with nature, this paper culminates in examining the role of eco-mythology in challenging the anthropocentric point of view and establishing a profound relationship between humans and the green world. This study also establishes these novels within a broader literary context juxtaposing them with other works of eco-mythology and reviewing their contribution to eco-critical discourse. This study examines how storytelling techniques employed by the authors are used to critique environmental impairment and ecological inheritance, while advocating for a more sustainable and sacred relationship with nature.

Keywords: Eco-mythology, Anthropocentrism, Environmental challenges, Eco-criticism, Nature.

"The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help. We grow them here in nurseries. Tend them like our own children, until they're ready for the world. Then they take off. Find some bit of ground to call their own. A generation later, they're trees."

- *The Overstory* by Richard Powers

This quotation foregrounds the connection between humans and trees, which is a recurring motif that reinforces the mythological and spiritual role of trees in human life. When dealing with environmental degradation and a growing dissolution between humans and the natural world, literature has increasingly turned to eco-mythology as a narrative technique to examine and reflect upon these themes. As the term eco-mythology denotes, the integration of ecological concerns with mythological elements allows the authors to interweave narratives that represent both modern environmental awareness and ancient cultural discernment. This paper attempts to explore the use of eco-mythology in two contemporary novels: “*The Overstory*” by Richard Powers and “*Greenwood*” by Michael Christie. These texts, through their convoluted narratives and deep engagement with ecological themes, offer a perspective that shows human-nature relationships in varied forms. This paper will demonstrate that eco-mythology in these works not only deepens the narrative complexity but also acts as a powerful tool for critiquing contemporary environmental issues.

Introduction

All living creatures, including humans, are dependent on their surroundings, i.e. nature for all their needs, which shows how important it is for humans to understand the role of nature and their responsibility to look after it and work out possible solutions to maintain the integrity of nature. The "Echoes of the forest" is a powerful motif in both “*The Overstory*” by Richard Powers and "Greenwood" by Michael Christie. These texts explore the complex and often spiritual relationship between humans and trees, with forests accentuated as a primary force that influence characters, narratives, and the essential themes of ecological consciousness.

In Richard Powers’ “*The Overstory*”, the forest is more than just a background; it is a living, breathing entity that strongly impacts the lives of the characters depicted in the novel. Redwoods, known as the giant trees of America and once considered part of its heritage, began to be cut down after 1850’s. These trees, which were once admired by the citizens for their immense heights and resilience to issues such as forest fires, later succumbed to increasing human greed for income derived from logging them. The trees in the text are represented as ancient beings with their own stories and sagacity. This concept is connected to the idea that trees hold memories of the planet’s history and are spectators to the transit of time. The "echoes of the forest" in *The Overstory* are perceived as trees communicating with each other and the

characters, demonstrating a network of connections that confronts the anthropocentric view of the world.

Depictions of the trees in *The Overstory* serve as a metaphor for association and perseverance. The author demonstrates forests, like humans, are part of a larger ecosystem. The structure of the novel itself reflects the branching and interwoven nature of trees, with each "branch" revealing a character's story that is eventually connected to a larger "trunk", symbolizing the shared experience of life on this planet.

In Michael Christie's "*Greenwood*", the forests are depicted as sacred and enduring entities, a constant presence that surrounds the lives of the Greenwood family across generations. The trees in the text symbolise lasting power, representing the tenacity of nature in defiance of exploitation by humans and environmental impairment. The "echoes of the forest" in *Greenwood* travels through the family's history, with the trees acting as both participants and observers in the unfolding drama.

The novel explores the concept that forests harbour secrets and stories crucial to understanding both the past and the future. Christie contrasts the slow, more deliberate rhythm of existence, which he terms "tree time," with the fast-paced, often destructive patterns of human life. This perspective suggests that the echoes of the forest are not just memories of what has been, but also signals of lessons for what could be if humanity fails to recognize its connection to the natural world.

In both *The Overstory* and *Greenwood*, the forest is depicted as an important entity, almost mythical presence that provides reflection of human existence. These forest echoes are not merely passive backdrops but active participants in life's narration. They underpin the weight of history, culture, spirituality offering an impactful dialogue on the necessity for ecological awareness and acclamation for nature.

These echoes act as reminders of the interconnectedness of all living forms and the significance of preserving the environment and the planet from adverse consequences. Both authors use the forest to question the idea of dominance of humans over earth, instead suggesting that humans must listen to and learn from the astuteness embedded in the natural world.

Comparison of *The Overstory* and *Greenwood* with other works on Eco-mythology

Many texts present eco-mythological significance in their narratives. For example, “*The Secret Life of Trees*” by Peter Wohlleben relates to this theme, offering a scientific yet poetic exploration of how trees form networks to communicate with each other. This depiction aligns with the mythological and interconnected portrayal of forests in “*The Overstory*” and “*Greenwood*”. Wohlleben illustrates trees as social beings with complex relationships, reflecting Powers’ and Christie’s depiction of trees as spiritual entities that safeguard memories and histories.

Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer interweaves Scientific dimension, indigenous forethoughtfulness and the art of storytelling to highlight the inviolable relationship between humans and the natural world. Kimmerer’s work emphasizes the importance of considering nature as a conscious entity like *The Overstory* and *Greenwood*. The concept of reciprocal relationships between humans and nature provided by her aligns with the idea of inter-relationship and respect for the forest seen in Powers’ and Christie’s works.

Andrew Krivak’s “*The Bear*” is a post-apocalyptic novel where Earth is reclaimed by nature after the decline of humanity. The novel draws strong parallels with “*The Overstory*” and “*Greenwood*” in its reverence for the natural world and its representation of the forest as a place of memory and spiritual significance. Krivak explores the concept that nature perceives beyond human experience and existence, carrying the echoes of all that has happened before, like Powers and Christie’s works. All three novels seek to draw readers’ attention to the long-lasting consequences of human actions on the environment and recognize the intense, often spiritual connections that bind us to nature.

Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* is a seminal work in contemporary eco-fiction that weaves multiple narratives that revolve around the theme of trees and their strong effect on human lives. While going through the discussion on eco-mythology, we can see that the novel’s structure shows the growth ring of a tree that allows the author to explore the interdependence of the characters on the world around them. Each character undergoes a transformation that is intrinsically linked to their interactions with trees, suggesting a spiritual and eternal connection between human consciousness and indigenous world.

Trees as characters

The critical aspect of “*The Overstory*” that is most compelling is its portrayal of trees as central characters in their own right and not merely as background settings. Trees possess a mythological quality, symbolizing endurance, astuteness, and a sense of time that far surpasses human experience. The character of Patricia Westerford, who is a dendrologist, discovers that trees can communicate but her discovery is neglected and ridiculed but later vindicated. Her research reveals the complex networks through which trees interact, providing a mythic revelation about the interconnectedness of all living beings. This idea reverberates with the eco-mythological concept where nature is shown as a sacred and intermingled web of life.

Powers’ use of this eco-mythology concept advocates the anthropocentric worldview that has long prevailed in Western thought. Trees are presented as sentient beings with their own stories and by this kind of portrayal the author invites readers to reconsider their communion with the world around them. This concept is further emphasized through characters like Olivia Vandergriff and Douglas Pavlicek, who are depicted as environmental activists fighting against actions such as deforestation. Their activism is portrayed as a mythic battle between the forces of life and destruction. The novel thus stances itself as a modern eco-myth, one that critiques the destructive tendencies of contemporary society while advocating for a more harmonious relationship with nature.

When comparing “*The Overstory*” with other works by Richard Powers, such as “*Orfeo*”, we find that the author consistently engages with themes of science, nature, and the limitations of human knowledge. While “*Orfeo*” explores the intersection of music, science, and bioethics, “*The Overstory*” situates itself on the more grounded, palpable world of trees and forests. Both “*Orfeo*” and “*The Overstory*” share similar concerns of humans’ attempts to dominate and change the natural world through manipulation. Thus, the larger scenario in “*The Overstory*” presents a continuous exploration of eco-mythological themes, where nature is both a source of inspiration and a site of remonstrance against human arrogance.

Similarly, “*Greenwood*” by Michael Christie presents a complementary exploration of eco-mythology through its narrative focused on multiple generations of the Greenwood family. Everything in this text revolves around the trees, its structure, plot, characters and even metaphors. The trees represented in this novel withstand various disasters surrounding them, such as droughts, floods, and storms. When they survive these ordeals, the impact of these

natural calamities becomes visible in their tree rings only after they are cut down. The text spans many decades, from the early 20th century to a dystopian future where environmental collapse has brought the world to a miserable condition. Each character struggles with challenges, such as the depression, climate change, and the dust storms that reflect the time period in which they are represented. The narrative mainly centres on the history of the Greenwood family with the timber industry, letting us know about the history, apparent of both exploitation and a growing need for conservation.

The trees in "*Greenwood*" are presented as a literal and symbolic backbone of the whole story. Trees are the symbols of life, continuity, and endurance, but they also observe the harmful and destructive impact of human greed and are unmindful of future consequences. The main event in the novel is "Great Withering," a catastrophic event that results in the collapse of all ecosystems and serves as a powerful metaphor that represents the negative impact of environmental ignorance. This apocalyptic vision is tempered, however, by the resilience of the remaining trees and the hope that new growth can emerge from the ashes of destruction.

The theme of eco-mythology as utilized by Christie in his work is particularly evident in the character of Willow Greenwood, an environmental activist who dedicates her life to the preservation of the forests once exploited by her ancestors. Willow is depicted as a mythic archetype of the guardian of nature; she is portrayed as a figure that recognizes the importance of the natural world and the need to protect it from harmful human actions. Her journey parallels the broader themes in the text, where cycles of growth, decay, and regeneration are presented not only in the natural world but also in the character's life.

Christie's use of dystopia in his works explains that he is engaging himself with a broader literary tradition that uses this genre to depict ecological collapse. In comparing "*Greenwood*" with other eco-dystopian novels, such as "*The Road*" by Cormac McCarthy, we find contrasting approaches to the genre. McCarthy's work presents a bleak and almost despairing vision of the future, utilizing the dystopian genre in its purest form. "*Greenwood*" on the other hand, represents a more balanced view, where the hope of regeneration and renewal always exists, even in the face of overwhelming odds. This approach reflects a key aspect of eco-mythology, where the natural world, despite being compromised, retains an inherent capacity for renewal.

Both "*The Overstory*" and "*Greenwood*" are rich in literary elements that build up their eco-mythological narratives. For example, "*The Overstory's*" narrative structure reflects the natural cycles of growth and decay, while Powers' elaborate discussions on trees imbue the natural world with a sense of wonder and reverence. Similarly, Christie's use of a multigenerational saga in "*Greenwood*" allows him to explore the long-lasting impact of environmental exploitation and the prospect of redemption through conservation.

Both novels effectively utilize another key literary element: symbolism. In "*The Overstory*", trees symbolize life, insight, and the communion of all living creatures. This symbolism is augmented through the novel's character representation; each character shares a unique relationship with trees that affect their lives in different ways. In *Greenwood*, trees symbolize continuity and suppleness, but they also serve as a reminder of the destructive consequences of human greed. The "Great Withering" in the text is a powerful symbol of environmental collapse, but it also calls attention to the potential for a new beginning and regeneration.

The themes of growth, disintegration, and regeneration are central to both novels and introduce us to the cyclical nature of eco-mythology. In *The Overstory*, these themes are realised through the lives of the characters and the role of the trees within their life, while in *Greenwood*, many generations of the Greenwood family are depicted. Both novels utilize these themes to reflect on contemporary environmental practices and to advocate for a more sustainable practice to preserve nature.

In addition to these themes, these texts also engage with broader eco-critical perspectives. For example, Powers' portrayal of trees as sentient beings challenges traditional anthropocentric views. It aligns with eco-critical arguments that advocate for recognising the intrinsic value of all living things. Similarly, Christie's depiction of the "Great Withering" reflects eco-critical concerns about the consequences of environmental degradation and the need for consciously taken actions.

In comparing "*The Overstory*" and "*Greenwood*" with other eco-mythological works, such as "*Barkskins*" by Annie Proulx and "*Flight Behavior*" by Barbara Kingsolver, it becomes clear that these novels are part of a broader literary movement that uses eco-mythology to represent persisting environmental issues. "*Barkskins*", for example, deals with the theme of long-term impact of deforestation that traverses through many generations. At the

same time, "*Flight Behavior*" examines the effects of climate change on both the natural species like Monarch butterflies and humans. The text under study utilizes eco-mythological themes to call the reader's attention to adopt more sustainable environmental practices that will help regain natural biodiversity.

Eco-mythology is not limited to contemporary Western literature but is a popular theme used in various literary traditions worldwide. For example, arboreal literature often incorporates this theme in which nature is presented as a sentient living being associated with human existence. In the works of indigenous authors like Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday, eco-mythology is used to explore the relationship between humans and the planet Earth on which they inhabit, and they call for the protection of this planet from catastrophic events.

In addition to indigenous literature, this theme is also found in many classic works of nature writing, such as Henry David Thoreau's "*Walden*" and Rachel Carson's "*Silent Spring*". These works, though not explicitly mythological, deal with the use of nature as a central theme and examine the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the natural world. Thoreau's emphasis on simplicity and self-sustenance in "*Walden*", reflects the eco-mythological essence of harmony with nature. At the same time, Carson's "*Silent Spring*" uses scientific evidence to draw on the destructive effects of human activities on the environment.

Contemporary authors are increasingly turning to eco-mythology to address urgent environmental issues. In addition to the above authors, other authors such as Amitav Ghosh and Margaret Atwood have also used eco-mythological themes in their work. "*The Hungry Tide*" by Amitav Ghosh explores the communion of humans with nature in context of the Sundarbans, a fragile and endangered ecosystem in India which is used as an eco-mythological element in the novel. Meanwhile, Atwood's "*MaddAddam*" trilogy uses eco-mythology to present the destructive consequences of environmental degradation and the capacity for renewal in a post-apocalyptic world.

The recurring use of eco-mythology as a theme in contemporary literature reflects a growing recognition of nature's importance and the efforts required from the anthropocentric community to protect our environment. By integrating mythological motifs with ecological themes, authors create stories that stimulate human consciousness towards nature and provide readers with insights into ancient cultural understandings. This approach not only helps shape

environmental consciousness but also encourages readers to consider thoughtful actions aimed at establishing a harmonious, mutual relationship between humans and nature.

Conclusion

The Overstory and *Greenwood* provides a rich tapestry of eco-mythological themes that frames the narrative in both the novels and broadens our understanding of human-nature relationship. By interweaving ecological themes with mythic elements, both the authors create compelling stories that prompts readers to rethink their relationship with the living world and put more emphasis on conservation practices to save the environment. These texts are part of more significant literary movements that seek to address the pressing ecological issues of present time through the power of storytelling.

Eco-mythology in these works aligns with broader discussions in the field of ecocriticism, raises concerns about environmental impairment, and presents a growing recognition of the importance of nature in contemporary literature. As we confront the challenges of climate change and environmental collapse, the use of eco-mythology in literature can serve to raise awareness, inspire thoughtful action, and revive a healthy connection with nature. Through the power of storytelling, authors like Richard Powers and Michael Christie remind us of the critical necessity of preserving the natural world, not just for its ecological value, but for its fundamental role in shaping human identity and ensuring our survival.

To conclude this analysis, it is fitting to present a poignant quotation from Christie's "*Greenwood*."

“Maybe trees do have souls. Which makes wood a kind of flesh and perhaps instruments of wooden construction sound so pleasing to our ears for this reason: the choral shimmer of guitar; the heartbeat thump of drums; the mournful wails of violins- we love them because they sound like us.”

-*Greenwood* by Michael Christie.

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