



NATURE, MEMORY, AND CLIMATE ANXIETY: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF THOMAS HARDY'S *THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE* AND RICHARD POWERS' *THE OVERSTORY*

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Abstract

Literary representations of nature have undergone a significant transformation from the nineteenth century to the contemporary period. Nature, once frequently represented as landscape, setting, or symbolic background, has increasingly emerged as an active presence through which literature interrogates environmental destruction, ecological interdependence, and human responsibility. Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878) and Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) provide particularly productive texts for tracing this transformation. Hardy's representation of Egdon Heath constructs a landscape possessing temporal depth and an existence that exceeds individual human lives. Powers extends this ecological consciousness by making trees central agents within a multi-generational narrative of environmental exploitation and resistance. This paper offers an ecocritical comparative reading of the two novels, concentrating on nature, ecological memory, anthropocentrism, and what contemporary criticism identifies as climate or environmental anxiety. It argues that Hardy anticipates an ecological understanding of human limitation by representing Egdon Heath as resistant to human mastery, whereas Powers transforms this awareness into an urgent critique of modern environmental destruction. Memory functions importantly in both works: the heath preserves geological and cultural histories, while trees in *The Overstory* embody forms of biological memory extending far beyond individual human existence. Read together, the novels reveal the evolution of ecological consciousness from an awareness of humanity's vulnerability before nature to an urgent recognition of human responsibility for environmental crisis.

Keywords

Ecocriticism, Climate Anxiety, Ecological Memory, Nature, Thomas Hardy, Richard Powers, Egdon Heath, The Return Of The Native, The Overstory, Anthropocene, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The relationship between humanity and the natural world has always occupied an important position in literature. Yet the meaning attached to nature has changed considerably across literary periods. Romantic and Victorian writing often explored landscapes in relation to human emotion, spirituality, industrialisation, and social transformation. Contemporary environmental literature, however, frequently confronts more immediate ecological concerns: deforestation, extinction, climate change, biodiversity loss, and the consequences of treating non-human life merely as an economic resource. Ecocriticism has provided an influential framework for examining this relationship by asking how literary texts imagine nature and how cultural narratives influence human attitudes toward the environment.

Cheryll Glotfelty broadly defines ecocriticism as the study of relationships between literature and the physical environment (xviii). Such an approach challenges interpretations that



treat landscape simply as decorative background. Instead, mountains, forests, animals, weather, plants, rivers, and ecosystems may participate actively in literary meaning. Lawrence Buell similarly emphasises that environmental texts question the assumption that human interests constitute the only legitimate interests within a narrative (7-8). From this perspective, Thomas Hardy and Richard Powers become especially significant despite the considerable historical distance separating them.

Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, first published in 1878, is inseparable from Egdon Heath. The novel famously begins not with a character but with the landscape itself. Before individual human dramas unfold, Hardy establishes the heath as ancient, persistent, and resistant to alteration. Characters such as Eustacia Vye, Clym Yeobright, Thomasin, and Wildeve develop their desires against this ecological environment. Egdon is therefore more than the geographical setting of the narrative; it becomes an alternative scale through which human ambition and mortality are measured.

Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, published approximately 140 years later, addresses ecological crisis much more explicitly. Its interconnected characters gradually discover that trees possess complex biological histories and that forests function through relationships largely ignored by anthropocentric societies. Powers presents environmental destruction not as an isolated problem but as a consequence of human assumptions about progress, ownership, time, and economic value.

This paper argues that reading the novels together reveals an evolution in ecological consciousness. Hardy depicts human beings struggling to understand or accommodate themselves to a landscape older and more enduring than their individual aspirations. Powers inherits this decentring of humanity but transforms it into ecological urgency: humans are not merely small before nature; their actions have acquired the capacity to destroy complex living systems. The transition from Egdon Heath to Powers' forests therefore illuminates the movement from environmental awareness toward contemporary climate anxiety.

Ecocriticism and the Decentring of the Human:

A fundamental principle of ecocritical interpretation is the rejection of absolute anthropocentrism. Conventional human-centred thought frequently values the environment according to its usefulness: forests become timber, rivers become water resources, land becomes property, and animals become commodities. Ecological thought instead emphasises networks of dependence among human and non-human forms of life.

Both Hardy and Powers challenge human exceptionalism, although they do so differently. In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy repeatedly places individual characters within the enormous temporal existence of Egdon Heath. Human beings enter and disappear while the heath continues. Hardy describes it as a place that seems almost unchanged by historical transformation (*Return*, bk. 1, ch. 1). The narrative perspective therefore reverses conventional hierarchy: rather than landscape existing temporarily around permanent human concerns, human lives appear temporary within a persistent landscape.

Powers develops this reversal further. *The Overstory* asks readers to imagine time from the perspective of trees. A human lifetime, conventionally treated as the central unit of narrative significance, becomes only a brief interval in arboreal existence. Patricia Westerford's scientific understanding of trees transforms her awareness of forests. She discovers that trees communicate, cooperate, compete, reproduce, and sustain complex ecological communities (*Overstory*, "Trunk"). What appears silent to human beings is not necessarily lifeless or passive.

This difference between perception and reality is crucial to both novels. Hardy's characters frequently interpret Egdon according to personal desires. Eustacia regards the heath as



imprisonment because it prevents her from accessing the glamorous urban existence she imagines elsewhere. Clym, by contrast, returns from Paris and sees meaningful possibilities in the same environment. Nature remains physically present, but its human meanings vary. Hardy thereby reveals the tendency to transform landscape into a reflection of human aspiration.

Powers challenges this tendency even more directly. His trees cannot adequately be understood merely as symbols for human emotions. They possess lives independent of human interpretation. The novel repeatedly asks readers to recognise that the non-human world continues beyond the boundaries of human perception.

Egdon Heath as Landscape, Memory, and Ecological Presence:

Hardy's opening description of Egdon Heath is among the most ecologically suggestive passages in Victorian fiction. The heath appears ancient enough to resist the historical changes that have transformed surrounding society. Darkness intensifies rather than diminishes its identity, and the landscape seems to possess an existence preceding the arrival of individual characters (*Return*, bk. 1, ch. 1).

From an ecocritical perspective, this representation challenges the assumption that nature becomes meaningful only through human activity. Egdon has its own duration. Generations of inhabitants have crossed it, worked upon it, loved and suffered within it, yet it remains larger than any single biography. The landscape consequently becomes a form of ecological memory.

Memory in Hardy is therefore not confined to human consciousness. Roads, paths, vegetation, seasonal cycles, traditional occupations, and local customs preserve relationships between communities and the land. The reddleman Diggory Venn, for instance, appears almost physically integrated with the heath through his occupation and continuous movement across it. Similarly, the bonfires of the opening chapters connect contemporary inhabitants with practices extending into an indefinite past.

The heath also reveals conflict between belonging and alienation. Eustacia experiences Egdon as a restrictive environment. Her longing for Paris is partly a longing to escape a landscape she associates with monotony and social limitation. Her dissatisfaction illustrates a distinctly modern desire to transcend locality. She wants the world to conform to her imagined life rather than adapting herself to the conditions of place.

Clym initially represents an opposite movement. His return from Paris suggests rejection of metropolitan materialism and renewed attachment to Egdon. His decision to educate local people demonstrates a desire to create meaningful life within his native environment. Nevertheless, Clym also discovers that belonging to nature does not mean controlling it. His declining eyesight forces him into furze cutting, bringing his body into direct contact with the physical environment.

Hardy therefore refuses a simplistic distinction between benevolent nature and destructive civilisation. Egdon can sustain, isolate, inspire, and endanger. Its ecological significance lies precisely in its indifference to human expectations.

Trees, Deep Time, and Ecological Memory in *The Overstory*:

If Egdon Heath functions as a repository of ecological memory, the trees of *The Overstory* extend that concept across centuries. Powers structures the novel through sections entitled "Roots," "Trunk," "Crown," and "Seeds," consciously modelling narrative form upon arboreal growth. Human stories initially appear separate, like individual trees, but gradually become interconnected within a larger ecological system.

The Hoel family's chestnut tree provides a powerful example. Generations photograph the tree at regular intervals, producing a visual record that exceeds individual human lives (*Overstory*, "Roots"). Family members age and disappear while the tree continues to grow. The photographs



therefore preserve two kinds of temporality: rapid human succession and slower arboreal development.

This temporal contrast is central to the novel's ecological ethics. Human societies often make environmental decisions according to political terms, commercial profits, or individual lifetimes. Forests, however, develop across periods far longer than these systems normally acknowledge. Destroying an old-growth forest may take hours or days, while recreating its ecological complexity may require centuries.

Patricia Westerford gives scientific articulation to this idea. Her research suggests that trees exist through networks of cooperation and chemical communication rather than merely as isolated organisms. Her discoveries initially encounter professional resistance because they challenge established assumptions. Eventually, however, scientific developments begin validating ideas that once seemed improbable. Powers thereby connects ecological consciousness with a transformation in human knowledge.

Trees also become witnesses to human history. Their rings record environmental conditions; their bodies preserve evidence of fire, disease, rainfall, damage, and survival. In this sense, *The Overstory* transforms memory from an exclusively psychological phenomenon into a biological and material process. The forest remembers differently from human beings.

From Environmental Unease to Climate Anxiety:

The term "climate anxiety" belongs primarily to contemporary environmental discourse, and applying it directly to Hardy requires historical caution. Hardy was not writing about anthropogenic climate change in its present scientific meaning. Nevertheless, *The Return of the Native* expresses environmental unease that can productively be read as a precursor to contemporary ecological consciousness.

Hardy repeatedly demonstrates that human aspirations become fragile when confronted with forces beyond human control. Weather, darkness, distance, terrain, and seasonal change influence the possibilities available to his characters. Egdon does not organise itself according to human convenience. The novel therefore destabilises confidence in human mastery over environment.

In *The Overstory*, environmental anxiety becomes historically specific and politically urgent. The destruction of old-growth forests is caused not by abstract fate but by identifiable economic and institutional practices. Characters witness trees being cut despite the ecological knowledge available to society. Their anxiety consequently emerges from the contradiction between knowing environmental destruction is occurring and being unable to stop it.

Nick Hoel, Olivia Vandergriff, Douglas Pavlicek, Mimi Ma, and Adam Appich become involved, in different ways, with environmental activism. Their participation demonstrates increasing frustration with institutions that translate forests into marketable resources. Their protests also raise difficult ethical questions concerning resistance. Powers does not romanticise environmental activism as an uncomplicated solution; instead, he explores the psychological consequences of confronting systems whose environmental effects exceed the capacity of individual action.

Climate anxiety in the novel can therefore be understood as a crisis of scale. Individuals recognise that ecological systems are enormous and interconnected, yet their own capacity to protect those systems appears painfully limited. Timothy Clark identifies scale as a fundamental difficulty within Anthropocene thinking because actions that appear insignificant individually can produce immense consequences collectively (72). Powers converts this conceptual problem into narrative experience.



Human Desire versus Ecological Time:

One of the strongest connections between Hardy and Powers concerns the difference between human desire and ecological time. Hardy's characters experience their ambitions as urgent. Eustacia wants escape; Wildeva pursues desire; Clym seeks social purpose; Thomasin seeks domestic stability. Yet Egdon remains largely indifferent to these individual timelines.

The same contrast operates more radically in Powers. Trees live according to durations that challenge the speed of capitalist consumption. Forests accumulate ecological complexity slowly, whereas industrial logging destroys them rapidly. The conflict is therefore not merely between humans and trees but between incompatible conceptions of time.

Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" is useful here. Nixon describes forms of environmental destruction that occur gradually and often remain difficult to represent because they lack the spectacular immediacy associated with conventional violence (2). Deforestation, species decline, soil degradation, and climate disruption frequently operate through precisely such extended processes. *The Overstory* attempts to make slow ecological violence narratively visible by asking readers to perceive environmental change across generations.

Hardy's heath similarly encourages long temporal perception. The tragedy of an individual human life is intense, but from Egdon's perspective it is momentary. Powers takes this awareness further by suggesting that humanity's short-term economic thinking threatens ecological systems upon which future generations depend.

Female Experience and Ecological Consciousness:

Although neither novel can simply be classified as ecofeminist, their female characters offer important perspectives on relationships between vulnerability, power, and environment. Eustacia's conflict with Egdon reveals the danger of interpreting nature exclusively through personal desire. Thomasin develops a more accommodating relationship with local life, while Mrs. Yeobright's fatal journey across the heath illustrates the physical vulnerability of human bodies within demanding environmental conditions.

In Powers, Patricia Westerford represents one of the strongest intersections between gender, knowledge, and ecological consciousness. Her scientific work is initially dismissed, demonstrating the institutional difficulties encountered by a woman proposing ideas that challenge established knowledge. Her later recognition parallels society's gradual awakening to ecological interdependence.

Olivia's environmental commitment is more activist and spiritual. Her experiences lead her toward the conviction that forests possess a value irreducible to human economics. Mimi Ma likewise undergoes a transformation from professional life toward environmental resistance. These characters broaden the novel's ecological perspective by demonstrating that environmental consciousness is not simply scientific information; it involves ethical transformation.

The comparison consequently reveals a movement from women negotiating their relationship with landscape in Hardy to women actively defending ecological systems in Powers.

Comparative Findings and Results:

The comparative analysis establishes that both novels challenge anthropocentric understandings of nature, though the degree and purpose of that challenge differ. Hardy presents Egdon Heath as an ancient ecological presence against which human ambitions appear temporary. Powers expands this perspective by granting forests biological complexity, interconnectedness, and temporal depth.

A second finding concerns memory. In Hardy, landscape preserves cultural and historical memory through paths, customs, occupations, seasonal rituals, and repeated patterns of human



habitation. In Powers, ecological memory becomes more explicitly biological. Trees preserve histories through growth and material change, while forests embody relationships accumulated across generations.

Third, the novels demonstrate a significant historical transformation in environmental anxiety. Hardy depicts uncertainty concerning humanity's relationship with place and the limits of human control. Powers presents ecological anxiety as a response to documented human destruction of environmental systems. The contemporary environmental crisis is therefore distinguished by responsibility: humans are not simply vulnerable before nature but have become agents capable of transforming planetary conditions.

Finally, both novels reveal the inadequacy of purely human timescales. Egdon Heath and Powers' forests exist across durations that exceed individual lives. Ecological consciousness begins when characters—and readers—recognise that human existence belongs to temporal and biological systems much larger than the individual self.

Conclusion:

A comparative ecocritical reading of Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* and Richard Powers' *The Overstory* demonstrates a remarkable continuity in literary efforts to challenge human-centred perceptions of nature while simultaneously revealing the historical evolution of environmental consciousness. Hardy's Egdon Heath establishes an ecological perspective by presenting landscape as ancient, enduring, and resistant to the ambitions of individuals. Human characters move across it temporarily, carrying their desires, conflicts, and tragedies into an environment that precedes and survives them.

Powers' *The Overstory* transforms this environmental awareness into a direct confrontation with contemporary ecological crisis. Trees are no longer merely elements of landscape; they become living participants in networks that sustain ecosystems and preserve biological histories. The novel insists that environmental destruction results from failures of perception—particularly the inability of modern societies to recognise non-human life as possessing value beyond immediate economic utility.

Memory connects the two novels in particularly significant ways. Egdon remembers through landscape and cultural continuity, whereas Powers' trees remember through biological growth and ecological networks. Both works consequently invite readers to imagine forms of memory extending beyond individual human consciousness.

The movement from Hardy to Powers also traces the development from environmental unease toward climate anxiety. Hardy questions human mastery by placing fragile individuals within a powerful landscape. Powers confronts the more disturbing contemporary reality that humanity has acquired unprecedented power over ecological systems without developing an equivalent capacity for restraint. His characters therefore experience anxiety not simply because nature is beyond human control but because human civilisation is damaging systems that it cannot easily restore.

Ultimately, *The Return of the Native* and *The Overstory* encourage a reconsideration of humanity's position within the natural world. Their ecological significance lies in replacing the idea of nature as passive background with an understanding of environment as active, historical, interconnected, and temporally profound. Read together, the novels reveal that ecological consciousness requires a transformation in scale: from the individual to the ecosystem, from immediate desire to deep time, and from ownership of nature to participation within it. In an age increasingly defined by climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss, this literary reimagining of human–nature relationships acquires renewed ethical urgency.



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