

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
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**ART AS ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN
RICHARD POWERS' *THE OVERSTORY*: ANALYSIS
OF NICHOLAS HOEL
BA thesis**

**BIRGIT MAHLA
SUPERVISOR: *Prof.* RAILI MARLING**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to explore the development of Nicholas Hoel and analyse how his role as an artist contributes to the portrayal of human-tree relationships and environmental themes in Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory*.

The thesis consists of an introduction, a literature review, an empirical analysis part, and a conclusion. The introduction provides brief background information on the author and a summary of the novel. The literature review consists of an overview of environmental discussions in literature, the role of art in conveying environmental issues, and the existing research on *The Overstory* in the context of environmental discourse.

The empirical part explores Nicholas' character development within the novel's narrative framework. This part also analyses Nicholas Hoel's artwork and its evolution throughout the novel.

The conclusion presents the summary of the thesis' findings.

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INTRODUCTION

Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner Richard Powers' 2018 novel *The Overstory* stands as a testament to the power of literature in illuminating environmental issues and fostering a deeper connection with nature. As an accomplished American author known for his exploration of science and technology, Powers embarked on a unique endeavour with *The Overstory*. He had wished to "write a novel where all the main characters were trees" (Hamner 2018: para. 5) but seeing that would have been an impossible job for a novelist, he instead aimed to convey the story of trees through human characters. The broader aim of this undertaking was to use the tools available through literature to raise environmental awareness and inspire collective action for a more sustainable future.

Literature has long been recognised as a potent vehicle for shaping perspectives and inciting change. Michael Mack (2012:11) eloquently articulates this notion:

Literature not only represents to us our world but it also shows us ways in which we can change the world or adapt to changes which have already taken place without our realization. Literature's cognitive dimension helps us cope with the current as well as future challenges by changing the way we think about ourselves, our society and those who are excluded from or marginalized within our society.

Thus, it can be said that literature can challenge ingrained perceptions and prompt readers to reevaluate their relationship with the natural world. In exploring the intersection of literature and environmental consciousness, *The Overstory* grapples with the complexities of human-nature interconnectedness. Through its multifaceted narrative structure and rich character development, Powers weaves a tapestry of human experiences intricately intertwined with the arboreal realm.

The Overstory is told from a third person omniscient perspective and its intricate storyline unfolds through the lives of nine characters in the United States. Mimicking the structure of a tree, the novel is divided into four sections titled "Roots", "Trunk", "Crown" and "Seeds". The first section begins by introducing the characters in their own chapters, each with their own unique relationship to trees. Consecutively, we meet artist Nicholas

Hoel, engineer Mimi Ma, psychologist Adam Appich, lawyer Ray Brinkman and stenographer Dorothy Cazaly, war veteran Douglas Pavlicek, computer programmer Neelay Mehta, botanist Patricia Westerford, and actuarial science student Olivia Vandergriff. By incorporating a large number and variety of characters, the author seems to represent the issue of (dis)connection between humans and trees as a universal one. All of these characters' storylines intersect, reflecting the overarching themes of resilience, loss, and environmental activism.

Due to the large number of characters in this novel, it is impossible to cover all of them in a meaningful fashion in a BA thesis. Therefore, I will only focus on Nicholas, Patricia and Olivia since their storylines are most relevant for the thesis at hand. Nicholas, an artist whose family legacy is intertwined with a chestnut tree planted generations ago, embarks on a journey of self-discovery and environmental advocacy. Patricia, a pioneering scientist challenging conventional wisdom about tree communication, delves into the intricate web of forest ecosystems. Olivia, a college dropout undergoes a transformative experience after surviving a near-death accident that leaves her with the ability to hear “voices” which call out for her help (Powers 2018: 163). As the narrative unfolds, the characters are brought together by their shared passion for understanding the uniqueness of trees and growing awareness of environmental crises, although not all of them meet each other physically. Nearly all of the characters' journeys intersect through various forms of activism, be it directly protesting against logging in the old-growth forests or pursuing activism through scientific research and technological innovation. Against the backdrop of deforestation and activism, *The Overstory* explores themes of resilience, loss, and the power of nature to inspire and transform. Spanning 500 pages, Powers' novel immerses readers in a rich tapestry of human experiences and environmental consciousness, inviting reflection

on our relationship with the natural world and the urgent need for ecological awareness and action.

While much scholarly attention has been devoted to Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, particularly in the analysis of trees as active participants and Patricia Westerford's character, there remains a notable gap in research focusing on the role of Nicholas Hoel's character as an artist. Therefore, this thesis aims to examine the development of Nicholas and analyse how his role as an artist contributes to the portrayal of human-tree relationships and environmental themes in *The Overstory*. By exploring Nicholas' artistic endeavours within the narrative framework of the novel, this study seeks to offer new insights into the intersection of art, literature, and environmental consciousness in contemporary fiction.

The first part of the thesis will give an overview of the role art and literature play in cultivating environmental awareness, along with the existing body of research on *The Overstory*. The second part of the thesis will focus on analysing Nicholas' character development and artistic growth within the novel's unique narrative structure. The main findings of the research will be presented in the conclusion.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent decades, literature has emerged as a powerful medium for exploring and addressing pressing environmental issues, offering nuanced insights into humanity's relationship with the natural world. The intersection of art and environmental activism has garnered much attention, seeing as global environmental issues are becoming increasingly apparent and the need for interdisciplinary discussions has become crucial in raising public awareness. This literature review seeks to explore three interrelated themes: the portrayal of environmental discussions in literature, the role of art in conveying environmental issues, and the existing research on *The Overstory* in the context of environmental discourse. By

examining these interconnected topics, the current review aims to illuminate the ways in which literature, art, and environmental awareness intersect and inform one another.

1.1 The Role of Literature and Art in Environmental Discussions

Scholars like Lawrence Buell highlight the transformative role of environmental texts in shaping societal attitudes. Buell is one of the pioneers of ecocriticism, or, as he later (Buell 2005: viii) calls it, environmental criticism. His influential book, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), examines how the environment can be and is represented in literature. His analysis on *Walden* (1854) highlights the ways in which literature reflects and shapes society's attitudes towards the environment, laying the groundwork for other studies in the field. Buell posits that environmental texts do more than just depict nature; they serve as a conduit through which readers are inspired to reevaluate and deepen their relationship with the natural world (Buell 1995: 97). He conjures up a list of four “ingredients” that make a text an environmentally oriented one:

1. *The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. [...]* 2. *The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. [...]* 3. *Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation. [...]* 4. *Some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. [...]* (Buell 1995: 7-8, italics in the original).

Although he notes that most texts holding such ingredients fall under the category of nonfiction, it is clear that many fictional writings could be called environmental texts, too, such as *The Overstory*.

Such a dynamic interaction between literature and reader is central to understanding the impact of narrative on environmental consciousness and activism. Rachel Carson's seminal work *Silent Spring* (1962) further exemplifies the influential role of environmental literature in shaping societal attitudes and inspiring environmental activism. Carson's eloquent prose and earnest plea for environmental stewardship resonated with readers

worldwide, laying the groundwork for subsequent generations of environmental activists and writers, including Buell (Donahue 2022: 13). This underscores the enduring relevance of literature as a catalyst for environmental consciousness and action.

Art serves as a potent medium through which individuals can perceive and interpret the environment, fostering new ways of seeing, looking, and thinking about nature while cultivating awareness of pressing environmental issues. Art, within the scope of this thesis, encompasses a spectrum of creative expressions, including visual forms like paintings, drawings, photography, and murals, among others. This definition is particularly relevant as it aligns with the artistic mediums employed by Nicholas, a central character in *The Overstory*, whose artistic endeavours serve as a focal point for exploring environmental themes and activism within the novel.

Malcom Miles (2010: 19) concurs that art holds the potential to shape perspectives, yet he contends that art may also inadvertently create distance from the issues it seeks to address, acknowledging the inherent challenge that the reality is always mediated and distanced within cultural contexts. I propose an alternative perspective. While acknowledging that art may introduce a degree of mediation and distance, it is important to recognise its capacity to foster deep emotional connections and provoke critical reflections. Instead of solely distancing audiences, art often serves as a medium for immersive experiences, inviting viewers to confront societal issues on a personal level. Additionally, the notion that art inevitably creates distance overlooks the diverse ways in which artists engage with their subjects – many employ techniques aimed at fostering empathy and understanding, rather than detachment. Furthermore, a piece of art, be it mediating from reality or not, can be said to nurture understanding of the environment on a much more personal and empathic level than for example scientific facts could. Art could make an

individual look inward and possibly change the outlook they have on the environment and through it, investigate what they, as an individual could do in the time of climate crisis.

Agnes Denes, a pioneer of the environmental art movement of the 1960s, echoes this line of reasoning by focusing her environmental installation pieces on "demand[ing] the audience to question their values" (Donahue 2022: 22). In her artworks, she has used aspects of nature and shown how it correlates with the lives of humans, the most notable example of which is her 1982 *Wheatfield* installation piece. She harvested wheat right in the middle of New York City with the aim to show the contrast between a busy and congested city with "the calmness and slowness of harvesting wheat" which was seen as a protest and a paradox (Donahue 2022: 26). Land Art extends these ideas by sculpting the land and manipulating natural elements on a large scale. This genre of art invites viewers to contemplate the interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world while raising awareness about environmental issues. Some prominent figures in the Land Art movement, such as Robert Smithson with his work "Spiral Jetty" (1970), utilise the environment itself as their canvas. Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" is constructed from salt crystals, mud and rocks from the surrounding landscape and spirals into Great Salt Lake (Donahue 2022: 10), evoking thoughts about natural processes, time, and human intervention in the landscape.

By examining the contribution of various artists and movements, it becomes clear that art plays a significant role in environmental discourse. Whether through the impact of visual arts or the thought-provoking nature of environmental installations and land art, these art forms serve to deepen one's understanding of and connection to the natural world. They not only evoke thoughts about time and persistence and highlight the need for environmental awareness and action, but also offer a means for individuals to reflect on their own understanding of the environment and their potential role in addressing environmental issues.

1.2. Previous research on *The Overstory*

In investigating various approaches to cultivating environmental awareness, it becomes clear that contemporary artworks contribute significantly to shaping our understanding of environmental issues. Richard Powers' *The Overstory* stands out as a notable example that has sparked considerable scholarly discussion. The book has invited many to study its themes, characters, and the concept of trees being active characters and/or storytellers. The latter has prompted scholars to delve deeper into the philosophical, ecological, and literary implications of such a narrative approach. The current literature review primarily explores the discourse surrounding the portrayal of trees as characters and storytelling entities, but it also delves into the scholarly analysis devoted to Patricia Westerford's character.

Solvejg Nitzke (2023), building on other academic works, examines what narrative means could be used to tell the story of trees who cannot tell it themselves. On the basis of dendrochronologist Valerie Trouet's work, Nitzke argues that by using anthropomorphisation as a narrative device, Trouet can tell "tree stories" in a way that would be comprehensible for a much bigger audience (Nitzke 2023: 210). This, however, raises the question whether in such a case the author would be telling a story of the trees or just interpreting what she sees, in a manner she pleases, turning the stories of trees into those of humans instead.

Moira Marquis (2021) challenges the claim that anthropomorphisation minimises the validity of tree narrative. She argues that ascribing human characteristics to a tree can be used as a narrative strategy to bring together humans and trees, as well as to point out the commonalities of both species. Marquis finds that the personification of trees allows for mutual communication and "makes trees and humans kin", allocating agency and consciousness for trees alongside humans (Marquis 2021: 431). While there is merit to the

latter point, a major issue with this line of reasoning is that by allocating trees agency and consciousness through personification from the human perspective, the narrative gives more attention to the humans, rather than trees. It is also important to note that humans and trees cannot be treated interchangeably (Schoene 2022: 1439), because they are biologically distinct entities.

Drawing on Wendy Wheeler's concept of 'biosemiotic realism,' Solvejg Nitzke emphasises that interpreting a tree's mode of communication is crucial not only for understanding tree narratives but also for influencing both natural and cultural evolution, to reshape our perspective on the nonhuman world (Nitzke 2023: 217). One example of how we as humans can conceive trees to be communicating, or "telling a story" is derived from the dendrochronologist Trouet's claim that the story of a tree hides in its tree circles (Nitzke 2023: 209). However, what we can tell from the circles of a tree stump could again just be a simple interpretation of what a human perceives. Besides, as Schoene (2022: 1441) puts it: "[...] story-telling requires much more than a simple recording of time passing". Nitzke (2013: 221) concludes that there is a need for re-evaluation of literary theories by taking narrative trees into account and not excluding them from human stories as they, too, are active participants of the discussion surrounding the past, present, and future we collectively, across-species, share.

Marquis argues that *The Overstory*, conforming to the traditions of the realist novel, is an example of the genre being unable to value non-human life and imposing object status on nonhumans (Marquis 2021: 428). She uses the novel's scientist character, Patricia Westerford, to showcase this argument when Patricia's attempts to introduce scientific facts of trees being able to communicate with each other are ridiculed by other established scientists. Marquis asserts that realist narratives do not place nonhumans higher or as high as humans on the Linnean hierarchy because otherwise they would be deemed magical

realism or fantasy. She states that to truly save trees from being chopped down for the benefits of humans, narratives need to give trees the status of subjects (Marquis 2021: 427-428). Marquis then goes on to argue, on the basis of Anishinaabeg epistemology, that trees should be given the status of people, or subjects, because representatives of every species are subjects (Marquis 2021: 433).

It could be said that in *The Overstory*, Richard Powers is attempting to do just that, to elevate the status of trees beyond their conventional portrayal, highlighting the importance of trees in the ecosystem as a whole. Isak Sköld (2023: 5) argues that by presenting trees to have a deep, mysterious, and otherworldly understanding of the world, Powers is in fact placing humans in a far less dominant position than trees. Therefore, it can be said Marquis unfairly criticises *The Overstory* for being unable to value nonhuman life and dismisses Powers' attempts to tell a story of trees in a realist novel form. Berthold Schoene (2022: 1436) examines the role of novel form even further and proposes that *The Overstory* shifts from a realist novel to an arborealist novel, by giving nonhuman narrative greater significance than the human one.

Patricia Westerford is arguably the most examined character among the eight human figures in *The Overstory*. Scholars have analysed her due to her complex interactions with the natural world and her significant role in shaping the novel's overarching themes. Notably, Patricia's storyline, especially her book *The Secret Forest*, touches upon the lives of nearly all other characters, establishing her as an essential conduit within the narrative's thematic framework. Pia Masiero (2020) investigates gender politics within *The Overstory* and takes a closer look at the book's female characters. Masiero (2020: 142) suggests that Powers implicitly conveys the idea that women are naturally more attuned to nature by giving the female characters the abilities to listen, hear and understand trees' way of communication. She further argues that through Patricia, Powers is able to discuss and

criticise the impact humanity has had on the planet stemmed from man's "entrenched sense of superiority and mastery" (Masiero 2020: 143).

This perspective aligns with broader ecofeminist critiques that highlight the interconnectedness between the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women. However, Masiero believes that Patricia's character "debunks a possible ecofeminist reading" because her vast tree-knowledge actually comes from her father and because Powers is not distinctly discussing the issues of oppression in this novel (Masiero 2020: 142-143). This interpretation, however, could be challenged. The fact that Patricia's knowledge comes from her father does not undermine an ecofeminist reading but rather highlights the gendered transmission of knowledge, where women build upon male foundations and make significant contributions. Additionally, while Powers may not explicitly focus on the oppression of women, the novel's theme of environmental degradation still supports an ecofeminist interpretation. Patricia's deep connection with trees and her critique of humanity's environmental impact resonate with ecofeminist critiques of patriarchal exploitation of both nature and marginalised groups.

Garrett Stewart (2021: 167), on the other hand, takes a closer look at Patricia's character traits by analysing the book's prose, especially its nuances in Patricia's storyline. He suggests that Powers strategically employs Patricia's speech impediment to slow the reader's engagement with the text, allowing for deeper exploration of ideas. By incorporating minor surprises in diction, Powers creates a deliberate reading experience. Patricia's storyline, especially her contemplation of nature, exemplifies this approach. Additionally, Stewart argues that Patricia's speech impediment anticipates and enriches the novel's exploration of vegetal communication, offering layers of meaning and complexity to the narrative (Stewart 2021: 168). However, one could argue that this attention to Patricia's impediment is a little overstated since further down the narrative Patricia overcomes her

speech difficulties and is able to communicate eloquently. Therefore, it may be more accurate to view her speech patterns as a temporary narrative device rather than a defining characteristic of her influence on the reader's engagement.

In conclusion, this literature review highlights the significant role of literature and art in fostering environmental awareness and activism. Key insights include the transformative power of environmental literature, as discussed by scholars like Lawrence Buell and exemplified by works like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which inspire activism and deepen readers' ecological engagement. Literature serves as a powerful medium for promoting environmental stewardship. Art also plays a crucial role in shaping environmental consciousness, as demonstrated by the creative endeavours of characters like Nicholas Hoel in *The Overstory*, and environmental artists such as Agnes Denes and Robert Smithson. While art may introduce mediation, it fosters deep emotional connections and critical reflections on nature.

Scholarly debates on *The Overstory* focus on the anthropomorphisation of trees and the thematic significance of Patricia Westerford. The main theme that has been explored is the possibility of telling the story of trees without falling into anthropomorphisation or projecting human characteristics onto trees. Different authors have also explored the possibilities offered by the narrative form for the expansion of novels beyond the perspectives of humans. The role of Nicholas Hoel's artistry does not seem to have been studied in detail, however.

CHAPTER TWO: INTERTWINED NARRATIVES IN *THE OVERSTORY*

This part of the paper will analyse two intertwined aspects of *The Overstory*: the narrative framework and the role of Nicholas Hoel as an artist. Nicholas' artistic perspective

adds another layer to the exploration of human-tree relationships. By examining both the narrative framework and Nicholas' artistic contributions, this analysis aims to uncover how Powers employs storytelling techniques and artistic expression to depict human-tree relationships and environmental themes in the novel. In order to achieve this aim I will analyse paragraphs that concern Nicholas Hoel and his art.

2.1. Nicholas Hoel: Interwoven with the Narrative Framework

The Overstory's narrative framework serves as a crucial scaffolding for exploring the intricate relationships between humans and trees, as well as the broader environmental themes woven throughout the text. Through its division into four distinct parts – Roots, Trunk, Crown, and Seeds – the novel presents a multi-layered narrative structure that not only chronicles the lives of its diverse ensemble of characters but also mirrors the growth of a tree and ultimately, the circularity of life. This narrative framework reinforces the idea that humans and trees are deeply interconnected, with each section shedding light on different aspects of human-tree relationships. It might also be a way for the author to tell us that even though the human characters hold most of the ground in the book, it is still a story of the trees. Or, as Masiero (2020:13) put it: “the human – the nine protagonists – is contained in the nonhuman and should be read against that structuring principle”.

The Overstory firmly situates itself within the realm of environmental literature, especially when examined through the lens of Buell's four “ingredients” for an environmentally oriented text. All of Buell's aforementioned elements are present in Powers' novel. For instance, the first, “*The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history,*” (Buell 1995: 7, italics in the original) can be seen in the first section, titled “Roots.” To underscore the interconnectedness portrayed between humans and trees

in the novel, the development of Nicholas' character is going to be analysed within the narrative framework. His evolution not only shadows the narrative but also underscores the novel's overarching themes of resilience and environmental consciousness.

In the "Roots" section, the reader is introduced to nine human characters, all of whom have their own story and their own individual connection to trees. This section reveals how they are deeply interconnected with the natural world, much like the roots of trees are intertwined beneath the forest floor. It could be said that by framing the characters' individual stories within the symbol of roots, Powers emphasises the interconnectedness of all living beings, our shared histories, and the importance of recognising our place within the larger ecosystem. Just as roots secure trees to the earth and enable communication between the plants, the nine characters, acting as individual roots of the novel, are bound together by their shared connection with trees and forests.

Nicholas' empathy for trees stems from his childhood, a period he reflects on in this section of the book while looking at a flip-book of photographs showing a chestnut tree planted on his family's farm four generations ago, "watching for those decades' secret meaning" (Powers 2018: 17). His great-great-great grandfather planted chestnuts, with only one surviving, and his son decided to start capturing the "*sentinel tree*" (Powers 2018: 10, italics in the original) every month, evolving into a "multi-generation photo project for pure weirdness" (Powers 2018: 19). This collection of a thousand images laden with significance, serves as the catalyst for Nicholas' exploration of nature and his decision to pursue a career as an artist, inspired by the intricate branches depicted in his family's chestnut tree photographs (Powers 2018: 19).

These photos also serve as a vivid illustration of the stark contrast in the passage of time between trees and humans. As Nicholas flips through the stack of photos, he reflects on how "[t]hree-quarters of a century runs by in the time it takes to say grace" (Powers 2018:

18), emphasising the slow and steady growth of the tree amidst the rapid pace of human life. This single tree, existing at the rhythm of nature, has witnessed the unfolding of several generations' events and memories, as the narrator intricately describes:

The photos hide everything: the twenties that do not roar for the Hoels. The Depression that costs them two hundred acres and sends half the family to Chicago. The radio shows that ruin two of Frank Jr.'s sons for farming. The Hoel death in the South Pacific and the two Hoel guilty survivals. [...] The generations of grudge, courage, forbearance, and surprise generosity: everything a human being might call the *story* happens outside his photos' frame. Inside the frame, through hundreds of revolving seasons, there is only that solo tree, its fissured bark spiraling upward into early middle age, growing at the speed of wood. (Powers 2018: 16, italics in the original)

By juxtaposing the rapid pace of human life with the slow, enduring growth of trees, Powers could be said to invite readers to contemplate their relationship with nature and the broader concept of time. This contrast serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of patience, resilience, and long-term thinking in addressing environmental issues.

On a day preceding Christmas Eve, a tragic gas-leak accident claims the lives of his family members, leaving 25-year-old Nicholas alone. Upon recovering from inhaling the toxic gas, Nicholas is greeted by the sight of the ancient chestnut: "When he looks up, it's into the branches of the sentinel tree, lone, huge, fractal, and bare against the drifts [...] All its profligate twigs click in the breeze as if this moment, too, so insignificant, so transitory, will be written into its rings [...]" (Powers 2018: 23). This poignant description could be said to symbolise the enduring presence and support of the tree, which has weathered generations. The scene also serves as a mirror to Nicholas' own state of solitude and resilience - just as the tree stands solitary yet strong against the elements of nature and chestnut blight, Nicholas finds himself alone in the aftermath of the accident. However, like the tree, he too possesses an inner strength and resilience that enables him to endure and persevere despite his profound loss.

From here on, the central plotline becomes linear, leading the reader into the subsequent and most substantial section of the book, titled "Trunk", spanning 198 pages. This section represents the central core of the narrative in which the storylines of the

characters begin to intersect and intertwine. Here, the novel delves deeper into the characters' struggles, conflicts, and personal growth as they come to realise the environmental degradation and unite in their commitment to safeguarding trees and forests. Nicholas, having experienced the profound loss of his family, appears to have lost his sense of direction in life, dedicating nearly a decade to solely his art – specifically, painting the family's cherished chestnut tree. It is through his artwork that Olivia Vandergraff, “chosen by beings of light to help preserve the most wondrous creatures on Earth” (Powers 2018: 170) after surviving a near-death accident, is one day drawn to Nicholas' doorstep. These “beings of light” guide her to Nicholas after she notices his sign “FREE TREE ART” on the side of the road (Powers 2018: 172, capital letters in the original). Even though it is not explicitly stated who these “beings” are, it becomes clear that they are guiding Olivia towards becoming an activist fighting against deforestation. Nicholas and Olivia's connection can be likened to intertwined roots ascending to the trunk, echoing the symbolism of this section's title.

Olivia's arrival marks a significant turning point in Nicholas' journey, infusing his life with new vitality and purpose. He has finally found someone who does not find his “[art-]studies of the Hoel Chestnut over the last decade” crazy (Powers 2018: 178) and this inspires him to embrace activism alongside her. Together, they embark on a road trip leading to tree-sitting a giant redwood named Mimas for nearly over a year. Powers has employed the image of a trunk in this section to underscore the characters' shared purpose and collective journey within the novel's narrative. Even if not all the nine characters physically cross paths, they are united by a common goal, symbolised by their collective ascent up the figurative narrative trunk. Their interconnected stories serve to reinforce the central message of the novel, just as a trunk supports the growth of a tree.

In the “Crown” section the narrative reaches its peak as the cast’s actions and decisions come to a head, leading to moments of revelation and reckoning. This section’s title serves as a metaphorical canopy under which the characters grapple with the consequences of their choices and face the ultimate reality of what the relationship between humans and the environment is really like. The repercussions of their experiences whilst attempting to save trees ultimately begin to spread their stories out like the branches of a tree, leading them to physically drift apart. However, the characters’ shared experiences and the bonds forged through their connection to trees continue to shape their lives and narratives, much like the interconnected branches in a tree’s canopy, which remain linked despite spreading out and far from each other. At the end of the “Trunk” section, Olivia, Nicholas, Douglas, Mimi, and Adam join forces to set fires to the properties owned by large logging companies in the forests. Olivia tragically dies when an explosion goes off sooner than planned and this breaks the group apart. Nicholas, having formed a romantic relationship with Olivia, grapples with the loss the hardest and does not know what to do without her, “his heart contracting back down to the size it was when she found him” (Powers 2018: 358). He is alone again, mourning and evading potential encounters with the police.

Over the years, Nicholas takes on various odd jobs, spending his nights working on his murals, spray-painting images of trees on city buildings (Powers 2018: 380). Despite appearing to have lost everything, Nicholas holds onto his passion for art and activism, intertwining them as a tribute to Olivia’s memory. Continuously traversing through life, Nicholas seeks signs from Olivia and a sense of purpose, which is underscored by a poignant scene from the later part of the “Crown” section, serving as an illustration of Nicholas’ awakening to the reality of the human-tree relationship. While visiting his former family farm he discovers that the chestnut tree planted by his ancestor has been felled. As he approaches, he notices “dozens of fresh chestnut shoots spring up from the dead stump”,

briefly instilling him with hope before he realises that “these fresh starts, too, will soon be blighted. They’ll die and rise again, over and over, just often enough to keep the deadly blight alive and vigorous.” (Powers 2018: 406) The blight afflicting chestnuts could serve as a metaphor for humanity’s relentless destruction of trees; the tree’s continual renewal symbolising the cycle that sustains both life and destruction, reflecting the interconnectedness of human and tree fates. Powers’ choice of words, particularly “deadly blight alive and vigorous”, carries a weight of resignation and inevitability, suggesting that despite brief moments of hope and renewal, the cycle of destruction persists. Through this scene and Nicholas’ realisation, Powers underscores the urgency of addressing environmental issues and the need for humans to rethink their attitudes and relationships with the natural world.

The final 29 pages of the book, in the section of “Seeds”, serve as a culmination of the novel’s themes and events. Within this concluding section, the narrative shifts its gaze towards the future, exploring the potential for renewal and regeneration amidst environmental challenges. Like seeds ensuring the continuity of a tree’s lineage, the narrative suggests possibilities for growth and change. In this final section of the book, Nicholas’ decision to embark on his largest art project yet, using fallen wood in the forest as his canvas, symbolises a culmination of his journey.

His journey throughout most of the novel has been marked by profound loss and isolation, but his connection to trees and his dedication to preserving them ultimately become a source of solace and purpose for him. However, a pivotal moment occurs when Nicholas realises the true meaning of the message Olivia had received from the voices that were guiding her – “*The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help.*” (Powers 2018: 493, italics in the original). He understands that the plea has a broader scope, implicating humanity itself. This realisation prompts Nicholas to reevaluate his activism. He

recognises the inherent interconnectedness between trees and humanity, sparking a personal transformation that is mirrored in his ambitious art project. Through creating the sculpture “STILL” (Powers 2018: 502, capital letters in the original) out of fallen wood, Nicholas not only emphasises the cycle of life and death but also embarks on a journey of self-discovery. This project represents an integration of his past experiences into his present motivations and actions, reflecting personal growth and evolution. By using fallen wood, Nicholas symbolically emphasises the cyclical nature of life since out of these dead fallen trees, new ones will spring up, illustrating how the losses in his life have shaped his art and identity. In other words - death and decay give rise to new growth and possibilities. This artwork also showcases how trees and nature on a whole will ultimately survive anything and emerge anew despite the damage that humanity has imposed on it. The profound significance of Nicholas' artwork is echoed in the concluding words of the novel: “*This. What we have been given. What we must earn. This will never end.*” (Powers 2018: 502, italics in the original). These words serve as a powerful admonition to humanity, emphasising our responsibility to cherish and protect the natural world. They underscore the enduring bond between humans and nature, urging us to steward the Earth's resources with reverence and care for the sake of future generations. In essence, Nicholas' “STILL” art project and the novel's closing words collectively reinforce the themes of interconnectedness and renewal, inviting readers to reflect on their role in safeguarding the planet for generations to come.

2.2. Nicholas' Artistic Evolution

Nicholas Hoel's artistic endeavours serve as a lens through which to explore the intricate relationship between humans and trees. Nicholas' creative outputs become vital components in conveying the novel's environmental themes. Drawing from Buell's insights, I argue that through the inclusion of Nicholas who employs art as a vehicle for activism,

Richard Powers demonstrates how creativity can be a form of activism, inspiring readers to consider how their talents and passions could be harnessed to advocate for the environment. This subchapter delves into Nicholas' role as an artist within the narrative framework of the novel and examines how his art evolving throughout the book contributes to the overarching message of environmental consciousness. By analysing Nicholas' artistic journey and the symbolism embedded within his various forms of art, we gain deeper insights into the ways in which art can shape our understanding of the world within literature and inspire action in the face of environmental challenges.

Upon the reader's initial encounter with Nicholas in the "Roots" section, it becomes evident that he deviates somewhat from his family lineage who are characterised as "violently practical people grounded in the logic of land and driven to work long, relentless days, year after year, without ever asking why" (Powers 2018: 19). Nicholas, however, having stumbled aimlessly around throughout high school in search of his identity, diverges from his family's farming roots and decides to become an artist. He attends an art school in Chicago and specialises in tree-related sketches and "hyperreal, *trompe l'oeil* paintings" (Powers 2018: 20), expressing a continued fascination with trees. He even wins the Stern Prize for Sculpture from the School of the Art Institute (Powers 2018: 21). Despite this pursuit, Nicholas grapples with a sense of aimlessness, highlighted by a dream where he is confronted with the question "What is it that you really want to make?" (Powers 2018: 20), a query that contrasts sharply with his family's tendency for never questioning their actions. This fundamental question prompts a profound realisation as he envisions himself sprouting "branching spines" (Powers 2018: 20) from his hands, foreshadowing his artistic exploration of the intertwining of human bodies and trees later in the narrative. In its initial depictions of Nicholas, the narrative does not distinctly outline the nature of his artwork, but indicates a strong influence of his fascination with trees.

As the characters' narratives start to merge and influence each other, particularly in the "Trunk" section, the reader is provided with a more intimate understanding of Nicholas' artistic expression. In the scene where Olivia encounters Nicholas after noticing his sign "FREE TREE ART" (Powers 2018: 172), the narrative provides a detailed description of his artwork through Olivia's eyes. The first thing Olivia notices is a mural on a barn on the Hoel's family farm which depicts a flowering Eden tree, "[i]t's like an opening in the side of this frozen, forgetting Earth onto a hidden summer" (Powers 2018: 172). It could be said that this bright, vernal mural symbolises hope for Olivia and her yet unknown road guided by the voices she hears: "She must think, figure out how this fits into the mission she has just been given" (Powers 2018: 174). Olivia even perceives Nicholas as the potential "key" to the mystery she has yet to uncover (Powers 2018: 174). It is as if trees are steering her along and this hopeful painting on the old barn is a nod towards activism. Right away Nicholas leads the woman to the barn and what she sees are referred to as "talismans" - paintings, drawings, various totems and clay sculptures, all "with similar subjects. Always trees, snaking in through the windows, walls, or ceilings of seemingly safe rooms, seeking out some human target like heat-seeking probes." (Powers 2018: 173)

Nicholas' art especially highlights his deep connection to the chestnut tree planted in the family farm. The imagery of trees "seeking out some human target" conveys a sense of urgency and inevitability, suggesting that Nicholas' art is not only a form of expression but also a manifestation of the profound interconnection between humans and nature explored throughout the novel. Additionally, the feeling of "safe rooms" that Olivia senses from the paintings implies that nature's influence cannot be contained or ignored, penetrating even the most sheltered spaces of human existence. Nicholas refers to his collection of artworks as his "tree period," spanning "nine years and a few months" (Powers 2018: 174). Olivia questions if he is transitioning from this phase, given his decision to give away his works,

but Nicholas clarifies that this is definitely not the end of his artistic focus. Instead, he explains that the chestnut tree on his family farm, which he has been studying for nearly a decade, has reached its conclusion with him. Nicholas elaborates that the chestnut, despite managing to steer clear from blight for a decade, has finally succumbed to the disease and is now dying. (Powers 2018: 176-177) The tree's fading away serves as a symbolic turning point, prompting Nicholas to redirect his energy towards a new purpose. Through his meticulous observations and infatuation with the tree, Nicholas has developed a deep connection to the natural world, which now compels him to action alongside Olivia. Thus, this scene not only signifies the end of one chapter in Nicholas' life but also heralds the beginning of a new chapter infused with purpose and activism.

Later, when the two have found “[t]he defenders of the forest” (Powers 2018: 212) and decide to join them, Nicholas recognises his purpose: “His decade of obsessive sketching has been practice for whatever art this sect requires of him” (Powers 2018: 215). This passage underscores the idea that his prior dedication to sketching trees was not merely a solitary pursuit but rather a form of preparation for a larger, more meaningful contribution to the cause of protecting forests. Here Nicholas, who previously may have felt adrift or uncertain about his direction in life, finds a newfound sense of purpose and belonging through his connection with trees and his involvement in the activist group. In this role, he discovers that his artistic talents can be harnessed to contribute to the group's mission, such as painting their faces, driving them to “become other beings, inscribed and altered, filled with power by ancient signs” (Powers 2018: 215).

As the narrative progresses, Nicholas and Olivia find themselves perched atop Mimas, a majestic giant redwood, in a vivid act of tree-sitting (Powers 2018: 262). This new vantage point marks a significant shift in Nicholas' artistic journey. “The view cracks open his chest. Cloud, mountain, World Tree, and mist – all the tangled, rich stability of creation

that gave rise to words to begin with – leave him stupid and speechless.” (Powers 2018: 264) From this elevated perspective, he crafts pencil sketches that capture “the local labyrinth of Mimas’ limbs [...]” (Powers 2018: 267) and the unseen natural world thriving at these great heights. There are huckleberries and salamanders, “[b]ugs swarm[ing], iridescent, parti-colored, minuscule horror-film monsters. [...] Plants grow along a pond flecked with tiny crustaceans.” (Powers 2018: 266) Overwhelmed by the sight and its diversity, Nicholas channels his awe into his artwork. These sketches, which he lowers to the loggers below, serve not only as artistic expressions but as eye-opening messages. The loggers, previously unacquainted with the life teeming in the canopy, are confronted with the richness and complexity of the ecosystem they threaten (Powers 2018: 287). In this phase of his journey, Nicholas' art transcends its aesthetic value, becoming a powerful tool for environmental advocacy and awakening among those least expected to be influenced.

After Olivia's untimely death at the end of the “Trunk” section (Powers 2018: 352), Nicholas finds himself grappling with a sense of loss and purposelessness in the “Crown” section, reminiscent of his state before meeting Olivia. He works mundane jobs and during the nights, “he works on his murals” (Powers 2018: 380) on the walls of city buildings which can be seen as a form of visual activism, where he uses vivid imagery to convey environmental messages and advocate for change. These murals feature images such as “[c]ows wearing Kevlar jackets [,] [p]rotesters throwing maple samara grenades [,] [and] tiny warplanes and helicopters swarming [over real roses] as if to pollinate them” (Powers 2018: 380). His art in this part of the narrative serves as a way to channel his grief and frustration into something productive, driven by the “compulsion to scream in images” (Powers 2018: 380), allowing him to express his passion for the environment and to continue advocating for change, even in the absence of like-minded people. Switching to creating murals in public spaces may be said to represent a shift in Nicholas’ approach to activism,

moving from direct action in the forests to a more visible and accessible form of advocacy that reaches a broader audience.

One of his murals, “covering a suite of lawyers’ offices in sixteen overlapping stencils” is of a chestnut with its branches crawling in the building (Powers 2018: 380) which resembles the paintings he did back in his “tree period” – “[...] trees, snaking in through the windows, walls, or ceilings of seemingly safe rooms [...]” (Powers 2018: 173). It could be said that by resurrecting the imagery of trees encroaching on human-made spaces, Richard Powers here is emphasising the persistent and inevitable intertwining of natural and human worlds. This motif serves not only as a reminder of nature's omnipresence and resilience but also as a call to action, urging viewers (and readers) to acknowledge and address the environmental crises that threaten these very interconnections. The use of the chestnut, a tree with personal significance for Nicholas, further enriches the mural's symbolism, tying Nicholas' personal artistic journey to broader themes of environmental advocacy and resiliency present in the novel. It could be said that Nicholas is looking back on his life and the choices he has made because the next time the reader meets him, he is returning to his old family farm.

He decides to dig up all the art he and Olivia buried on the farm land. As Nicholas unearths his artwork, the narrator describes how "Bacteria, fungi, invertebrates - living workshops down in the underground horizons - have spattered patinas across the sculptures in a masterpiece of blooms" (Powers 2018: 408). This description portrays Nicholas' sculptures as dynamic entities influenced and transformed by the natural world over the years underground, mirroring the interconnectedness between humans and nature depicted throughout the novel. Additionally, the narrator compares Nicholas' art depicting trees intruding on humans with the way Olivia came into Nicholas' life: "He was sleeping, and she burst in" (Powers 2018: 407). This comparison serves as a significant image for their

relationship and its impact on his life and work. Olivia's abrupt entrance into Nicholas' world mirrors the unexpected and forceful nature of the trees in his art, suggesting that both Olivia and nature itself have the power to alter the course of a person's life in profound and unforeseen ways. As the book is slowly coming to its conclusion, the "Crown" section ultimately serves as a reminder of one of the novel's core themes: interconnectedness of humans and trees. Through examples like Nicholas' buried artwork having been transformed and the comparison between Olivia's sudden entrance into Nicholas' life and the forceful nature depicted in his art, Powers underscores the profound influence of nature on human existence.

Throughout the novel, Nicholas' artistic journey mirrors his personal growth and development. Initially, his art serves as a tool for personal exploration and study of trees, reflecting his solitary introspection. As the narrative progresses, his art takes on a more outward-facing quality, becoming a means of communication and education for others. This shift has been exemplified by his actions, such as throwing his sketches of the nature visible atop Mimas down to the loggers or stencilling large murals on city buildings. However, in this final, "Seeds" section of the book, Nicholas' art transcends mere human perception, taking on a deeper meaning and impact that extends beyond conventional understanding. He has chosen the location for his "largest and longest-lasting sculpture" at random, in the middle of an unknown forest (Powers 2018: 485), secluded from public view. His sculpture consists only of the forests' givings, fallen wood and branches and once ready, makes up the word "still" on the forest floor which can only be visible from space. It can be said that this final artwork of Nicholas' is a piece of performance art, revealing itself in slow-motion in human time: "Already, this word is greening. [...] Two centuries more, and these five living letters, too, will fade back into the swirling patterns [...]. And yet – but *still* – they'll spell out, for a while, the word life has been saying, since the beginning." (Powers 2018: 502,

italics in the original) Powers' choice in poetic language to describe the gradual greening and eventual fading of the word evokes a sense of the natural world's enduring presence amidst the ephemeral nature of human existence. This final artwork might challenge readers to reconsider their perceptions of art as something static and permanent, inviting them to reflect on the fleeting yet profound beauty of the natural world. As well as make them contemplate about time, natural processes, and human intervention, just like Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" did and does to this day in the Great Salt Lake.

Nicholas Hoel's journey in *The Overstory* encapsulates the transformative power of art in fostering environmental consciousness. Through his evolving artistic expressions, Nicholas showcases how the relationship between human and nature can in fact change one's course in life and give them purpose. His final artwork, "STILL," illustrates Nicholas' utmost realisation about the human-tree relationship and serves as a poignant testament to the enduring message of nature's resilience and the fleeting nature of human existence. By weaving Nicholas' artistic progression into the novel's broader environmental themes, Richard Powers not only underscores the vital role of creativity in environmental activism but also has the capability to inspire readers to contemplate their own understanding of nature, as well as cultivate awareness of pressing environmental issues.

In further research, it would prove useful to examine Nicholas' specific artworks in more depth to find other possible interpretations to how and why Richard Powers has employed Nicholas' character as an artist in his novel.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the evolution of Nicholas Hoel's artistic journey in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, highlighting how his transformation from a solitary artist to an environmental advocate reflects the novel's complex portrayal of human-nature interconnectedness. The literature review established a foundation by exploring different perspectives on environmental literature and the role of art in activism, as well as examined the approaches previous scholars have taken in analysing Powers' book. These have, above all, concerned the challenge of representing non-human species without resorting to anthropomorphism or projecting human thoughts and feelings to other species. These theoretical frameworks provided a lens through which Nicholas's character and his artistic endeavours were analysed.

Throughout this study we have seen how Nicholas Hoel plays a significant role in *The Overstory* and its focus on cultivating environmental awareness for the reader. Literature has the potential to bring about personal and societal change, as discussed by scholars like Lawrence Buell and exemplified by works like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.

The current thesis also shows that different forms of art can indeed shape perspectives and inspire individuals to engage in activism to address environmental issues, as demonstrated by environmental artists such as Agnes Denes and Robert Smithson.

In analysing Nicholas' character development, we have seen that before meeting Olivia and other activists, Nicholas is alone and lost in life, but as the narrative moves along, he begins to find his purpose in life. He invests his time in activism and through this, his love for nature grows and this is reflected in his evolving artistry. The main findings from analysing Nicholas' artistic journey demonstrated that his artwork highlights the ways in which art can impact and motivate broader ecological consciousness. Nicholas' artistic evolution mirrors his personal growth and increased environmental consciousness. His early

works, characterised by hyperreal tree sketches and solitary introspection, slowly shift towards a more outward-facing approach, exemplified by his participation in a tree-sitting protest and creating impactful public murals. These murals serve as visual activism, aiming to raise awareness about environmental issues among broader audiences. His final artwork, "STILL," created in a secluded forest and intended to be visible only from space, captures the novel's message of nature's resilience and the cyclical nature of life, urging humanity to acknowledge and respect the enduring presence of the natural world.

It is crucial to recognise the ongoing importance of narratives like *The Overstory* and the works of environmental artists in shaping public discourse and efforts to protect nature. As environmental issues worsen, literature and art serve as powerful tools for raising awareness, fostering empathy, and impelling action. By continuing to explore and analyse such narratives, we can cultivate a deeper appreciation for the natural world and inspire collective efforts towards a more sustainable future.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Birgit Mahla

Art as Environmental Activism in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*: Analysis of Nicholas Hoel

Kunst kui keskkonnaaktivism Richard Powersi romaanis „Ilmapuu”: Nicholas Hoeli analüüs

Bakalaureusetöö

2024

Lehekülgede arv: 31

Annotatsioon:

Selle bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on uurida Richard Powersi romaani „Ilmapuu” kunstnikust tegelast Nicholas Hoeli kujutamist kui keskkonnaaktivismi vormi.

Antud lõputöö koosneb sissejuhatausest, kirjanduse ülevaatest, empiirilisest analüüsist ja kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatus annab lühida ülevaate Richard Powersist ning kokkuvõtte romaanist. Kirjanduse ülevaade kajastab arutelu kirjanduse rollist keskkonnateemalises diskursuses, ja kunsti rollist keskkonnaprobleemide kujutamisel. Lisaks antakse ülevaade ka teose „Ilmapuu” varasematest käsitlustest, mille keskmes on küsimus kas romaanis saab kajastada teiste liikide vaatenurka peale inimeste oma. Töö empiiriline osa uurib Nicholase tegelaskuju muutumist romaanis. Lisaks uuritakse ka Nicholas Hoeli kunstiteoseid ja tema kunsti arengut romaanis vältel.

Bakalaureusetöö kokkuvõtteks võib öelda, et Nicholas Hoeli roll kunstnikuna romaanis „Ilmapuu” näitlustab kunsti rolli keskkonnadiskursuse kontekstis. Nicholase isiklik ja kunstiline teekond illustreerib, kuidas kunst võib tõsta keskkonnateadlikkust ja inspireerida aktivismi. Nicholase varajased hüperrealistlikud puujoonistused arenevad romaanis vältel seinamaalinguteks ja kulmineeruvad lõpliku kunstiteosega „STILL”, mis rõhutab looduse vastupidavust ja elu tsüklilist olemust.

Märksõnad: Ameerika kirjandus, looduskirjandus, Richard Powers.

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