

The Narrative of Trees from a Non-Human Centered Perspective: On the Narrative Ethics and Ecological Warning of the Overstory

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Abstract: *In the increasingly severe ecological crisis, the non-anthropocentric trend provides a key theoretical perspective for the study of ecological literature. Richard Bowers' novel 'The Overstory' breaks through the traditional human centered narrative framework of literature and constructs a 'tree narrative' system centered around trees. This article takes non-human centrism as its theoretical foundation, combines narrative theory and ecological ethics theory, analyzes the construction strategy of the novel "tree narrative", explores its narrative ethical core, and explores the ecological warning of human civilization behind the narrative. Research has found that novels establish the dominant position of trees through the diverse transformation of narrative perspectives, the cross scale extension of narrative time, and the symbiotic juxtaposition of narrative structures; Its narrative ethics revolves around "equality of life" and advocates for a symbiotic and awe inspiring relationship between humans and trees; At the same time, the novel takes the survival dilemma of trees as a mirror, criticizing the shortsightedness and plunder of anthropocentrism, and providing literary inspiration for contemporary ecological redemption.*

Keywords: 'The Overstory', tree narrative, non-human center, narrative ethics, ecological warning

INTRODUCTION

Research background and significance

In the process of industrial civilization, the development model dominated by anthropocentrism has triggered a series of ecological crises such as deforestation and species extinction, prompting the academic community to reflect on the relationship between humans and nature. The trend of non-anthropocentrism emerged, which denies the absolute subject status of humans in the universe and advocates extending moral care to non-human beings, providing theoretical support for reconstructing the relationship between humans and nature. Ecological literature, as an important carrier of ecological thinking, has gradually shifted from early natural writing to exploring the subjectivity of non-human existence.

Richard Bowers' 'The Overstory' is a landmark work in contemporary American ecological literature. The novel takes the life journeys of ten trees as clues, connecting the fates of eight human characters and constructing an ecological landscape of intertwined coexistence between trees and humans. Unlike traditional ecological literature that focuses on "nature from a human perspective," The Overstory innovatively constructs a "tree narrative" system, elevating trees from "background symbols" to "narrative subjects," achieving a narrative shift from human centered to non-human centered. This unique narrative style not only enriches the expression paradigm of ecological literature, but also contains profound ethical

thinking and ecological warnings.

Interpreting the "tree narrative" in *The Overstory* from a non-human centered perspective has important theoretical and practical significance. At the theoretical level, it can fill the gap in the current research on the ethical exploration of the novel's narrative, and improve the application of non-anthropocentrism in literary narrative research; On a practical level, its ecological warning can provide literary inspiration for human reflection on development models and the construction of a community of life between humans and nature.

Research status and entry points

The research on 'The Overstory' in both domestic and international academic circles has achieved certain results: foreign research mostly focuses on the ecological ideas and narrative structure of the novel, such as Lawrence Buell's affirmation of the novel's writing of 'inter species empathy' from the perspective of ecological criticism; Domestic research focuses on thematic interpretation, such as Zhang Li's analysis of the symbolic meaning of the "tree imagery" in the novel. However, existing research mostly focuses on the macro interpretation of ecological themes, lacking a systematic analysis of the construction logic and narrative ethics contained in the "tree narrative", and failing to fully demonstrate the unique value of the novel's non-human centered narrative.

This article takes "tree narrative" as the core entry point, supported by non-anthropocentrism theory, and combines the perspective of narratology, time, structural theory, and the concept of "life equality" in ecological ethics to explore how novels deconstruct anthropocentrism through "tree narrative", construct non anthropocentric narrative ethics, and explore its ecological warning to human civilization.

Research Methods and Framework

This article adopts the methods of literature research, text analysis, and interdisciplinary research. Sort out the core theories of non-human centrism and ecological narratology through literature research; Taking text analysis as the core, carefully dissect the construction strategy of the "tree narrative" in "The Overstory"; Integrating ecological ethics and narrative theory to achieve interdisciplinary interpretation of narrative ethics and ecological warnings. The research framework is as follows: Firstly, the theoretical basis of non-human centrism and ecological narrative is sorted out; Secondly, analyze the construction strategy of "tree narrative"; Further explore its narrative ethical core; Finally, explore the ecological warning significance of the novel and summarize the conclusion.

Theoretical basis: Non anthropocentrism and ecological narrative

The core essence of non-human centrism

Non anthropocentrism is a subversion of anthropocentrism, with its core essence being the denial of human "species privilege" and the advocacy of expanding the boundaries of moral concern to non-human beings. Aldo Leopold's "land ethics" first broke through the limitations of human centeredness and proposed the concept of "land community", which included soil, water, plants, etc. in the scope of moral community; Tom Reagan, from the perspective of animal rights, believes that non-human beings with perceptual abilities have "innate value" and should receive moral respect; Holmes Rowlston further extended moral concern to imperceptible plants and proposed the ethical standard of "ecosystem health", providing a theoretical basis for the moral subjectivity of plants. These theories collectively constitute a non anthropocentric ideological system, providing core theoretical support for interpreting the "tree narrative" in *The Overstory*.

The non-human turn of ecological narrative

Traditional narrative literature often takes humans as the absolute narrative subject, with non-human entities serving only as "background" or "symbols" for human stories. With the development of ecological literature, there has been a "non-human turn" in narrative, which breaks the monopoly of human narrative

power and endows non-human beings with the status of subject matter. The non-human turn of ecological narrative is mainly reflected in three dimensions: first, the diversification of narrative perspectives, breaking through the single human perspective and reconstructing narrative scenes through the "perception" of non-human entities; The second is the expansion of narrative time, breaking free from the limitations of the human life cycle and presenting the life process on a time scale of non-human existence; The third is the symbiotic nature of narrative structure, constructing a narrative network where human and non-human beings are equally interwoven. The "tree narrative" in "The Overstory" is a typical example of the non-human turn in ecological narrative.

The Construction Strategy of "Tree Narrative" in The Overstory

The Overstory abandons the traditional narrative mode of "human dominance and tree accompaniment", and constructs a narrative system centered on trees through three strategies: perspective transformation, time extension, and structural juxtaposition, establishing the narrative subject status of trees.

Narrative Perspective: From "Human Gaze" to "Tree Presence"

In traditional literature, trees often occupy an object status of being "gazed upon", while "The Overstory" achieves a perspective shift from "human gaze" to "tree presence" through the "limited presentation of human perspective" and "implicit expression of tree perspective".

The novel first deconstructs the authority of the human perspective through the "limited cognition" of human characters. The eight human characters all have limitations in their understanding of trees: botanist Margaret initially only regarded trees as "research objects" from a scientific perspective, ignoring their subjectivity in life; Engineer Doug sees trees as a 'developmental barrier', reflecting humanity's instrumental understanding of trees. The novel reveals that it is difficult for humans to truly understand the essence of tree life from a human perspective by presenting these limited cognitions.

At the same time, the novel endows trees with a sense of presence through "implicit narrative". The author did not directly adopt the anthropomorphic perspective of trees, but achieved narrative participation through the "life traces" of trees: the annual rings of redwood trees record the environmental changes of a hundred years, the root network of oak trees shows their symbiotic relationship with other organisms, and the four seasons of withering and flourishing of ginkgo trees bear the ups and downs of the fate of the human family. These 'trace narratives' free trees from their objective identity and make them 'present subjects' participating in the narrative. In the novel, when the century old redwood was cut down, the author detailed the "resin leakage from the wound" and "ring breakage" of the tree, replacing personification with the physiological response of the tree, but more powerfully highlighting the tree's perception of life.

Narrative Time: From "Human Scale" to "Tree Scale"

Human centered narratives often use the human life cycle as a time scale, and 'The Overstory' breaks through this limitation by reconstructing narrative time at the 'tree scale', showcasing the resilience of trees beyond human life.

The life span of trees in novels ranges from decades to thousands of years: the life of the Eastern white pine runs through the colonial history of the United States, the ginkgo tree witnesses the rise and fall of several families, and the redwood undergoes a hundred years of forest changes. The author highlights the short sightedness of humans and the eternity of trees by comparing "tree time" with "human time". The life of a human character only occupies a few dozen pages in a novel, while the life journey of a redwood spans over a hundred years. The "loud collapse" when it is cut down is not only the death of a tree, but also a rupture in a hundred-year ecological history. This transformation of time scales makes humans realize their insignificance in the natural time dimension and deconstructs their dominance over time.

Narrative Structure: From "Human Mainline" to "Coexistence and Coexistence"

Traditional literature often revolves around human stories as the main thread, with non-human elements as secondary lines. However, "The Overstory" adopts a network structure of "juxtaposing tree stories and human stories" to construct a symbiotic narrative system. The novel uses the life course of ten trees as implicit clues to connect the stories of eight human characters: Margaret's study of ancient oak trees connects the fate of ecologists and loggers, Doug's involvement in the logging of redwoods triggers protests from environmentalists, and Patricia's protection of ginkgo trees becomes a carrier of family memories. Trees are no longer the "tools" that connect human stories, but the "core hubs" of various narrative threads. This structural design makes human stories a 'footnote' to tree stories, rather than the opposite. At the end of the novel, the fate of the eight human characters is settled, while the surviving trees continue to grow, implying the transcendence of tree life over human civilization and highlighting the eternity of non-human existence.

The Narrative Ethical Core of "Tree Narration"

The "tree narrative" in "The Overstory" not only constructs the dominant position of trees, but also contains a narrative ethics centered on "equality of life", advocating for a symbiotic and awe inspiring relationship between humans and trees.

Ethical Basis: Establishment of the 'Natural Value' of Trees

The core of non-human centered ethics is to recognize the "innate value" of non-human beings, that is, their value does not depend on human utilization. The Overstory established the innate value of trees through "de instrumentalization" writing.

The novel criticizes humanity's instrumentalized understanding of trees: logging companies view redwoods as "timber resources" and ignore their century long life value; Urban planners view ancient trees as "landscape decorations" and arbitrarily transplant them, leading to their death. The author reveals the ethical fallacy of humans' instrumentalization of trees through these plots. At the same time, the novel combines scientific and humanistic perspectives to showcase the innate value of trees: from a scientific perspective, the photosynthesis of trees regulates climate, and the root network maintains soil and water, which are the core of ecosystems; From a humanistic perspective, trees carry human memories, culture, and emotions, and are witnesses to human civilization. The ginkgo tree guarded by Patricia is not only a part of the ecosystem, but also a symbol of family inheritance. Its value transcends human instrumental needs and highlights the diverse connotations of innate value.

Ethical Relationship: The Construction of Symbiosis and Reverence

Based on the innate value of trees, the novel constructs an ethical relationship paradigm of "coexistence" and "reverence". The symbiotic relationship is reflected in the interdependence between trees and humans: trees provide oxygen, wood, and spiritual comfort for humans, while human protection provides living space for trees. The forest guarded by environmentalists Hope and Nathan is not only a habitat for trees, but also a place for humans to gain spiritual peace, forming a symbiotic relationship between the two.

The reverence relationship is reflected in the respect for the life of trees. The "tree talker" Nim in the novel learned to listen to the needs of trees through his "dialogue" with them, and this "listening" is essentially a reverence for the life of trees. The author emphasizes that reverence is not "blind worship", but a respect based on the understanding of the essence of tree life. When Nim prevented loggers from cutting down ancient oak trees, he did not simply oppose development, but showed the tree rings and roots to the workers, making them understand the value of the tree's life and thus arousing their awe. The construction of this ethical relationship provides a model for the interaction between humans and non-human beings.

Ethical Practice: The Path of Human Ecological Awakening

The novel showcases the practical path of non-human centered ethics through the "ecological awakening" process of human characters. All eight human characters have undergone a transition from being "human centered" to "ecological awakening": Margaret has transformed from a "tree researcher" to a "tree

guardian", and Doug has transformed from a "logging engineer" to an "environmental participant", with the core of their transformation being an increase in awareness of the inherent value of trees.

The novel emphasizes that the key to ecological awakening is to "break down cognitive barriers" and achieve a conceptual shift from "utilization" to "symbiosis". When Margaret was studying ancient oak trees, she initially only focused on their scientific data. It wasn't until the oak trees were cut down that she truly realized the life value of trees by analyzing their annual ring data and discovering that they recorded centuries of climate change. This awakening is not rooted in moral preaching, but is based on a deeper understanding of the essence of tree life and has stronger persuasiveness.

The ecological warning significance of "tree narrative"

The "tree narrative" in "The Overstory" presents the truth of ecological crisis in literary form, deeply criticizes the development model of anthropocentrism, and points to the possible path of ecological redemption, with distinct ecological warning significance.

Critique of Anthropocentrism: Shortsightedness and the Cost of Plundering

The novel reflects on the survival dilemma of trees and criticizes the shortsightedness and plunder of anthropocentrism. Human beings excessively cut down forests for short-term benefits: century old redwoods are cut down to make furniture, primitive forests are developed into industrial parks, resulting in a large number of tree deaths, causing ecological problems such as soil erosion and species extinction. The plot of "revenge of trees" in the novel is not written in a superstitious way, but is the inevitable result of an imbalanced ecosystem: deforestation leads to reduced rainfall, intensified land desertification, and ultimately affects the human living environment. The industrial park that Doug participated in the development of, due to deforestation causing groundwater depletion, has seriously affected the lives of surrounding residents, reflecting the ecological law of "plundering nature will inevitably be backfired". The novel further points out that the essence of anthropocentrism is "cognitive arrogance", which believes that humans have the ability to control nature. The author exclaimed through Margaret's mouth, 'We thought we could understand trees, but we couldn't even fully decode their root network.' This cognitive arrogance led humans to ignore ecological laws and ultimately fall into an ecological crisis.

Reflection on the Biodiversity Crisis: The Chain Reaction of Tree Disappearance

As the "cornerstone species" of ecosystems, the disappearance of trees will trigger a chain reaction, leading to a biodiversity crisis. The Overstory demonstrates the severity of this chain reaction through specific plot points: after logging oak trees in a certain area, the number of squirrels that rely on oak fruit for survival sharply decreases, and the number of eagles that feed on squirrels also decreases, ultimately leading to the breakdown of the entire food chain. The author presents the core role of trees in ecosystems with scientific precision, revealing the harsh reality of "tree disappearance=ecosystem collapse". In the novel, environmentalists attempt to protect endangered tree species through a "tree bank", but are repeatedly frustrated by human development activities. This plot metaphorically depicts the current dilemma of biodiversity conservation: there is a sharp contradiction between human short-term interests and long-term ecological needs, and if anthropocentrism is not abandoned, the biodiversity crisis will further intensify.

Possible Path of Ecological Redemption: From "Conquest" to "Protection"

The ultimate goal of criticism and warning is directed towards redemption, and the novel proposes a possible path for ecological redemption through the "tree narrative" - a conceptual transformation from "conquering nature" to "protecting nature". This transformation is manifested in three levels: At the individual level, achieve "cognitive awakening" by understanding the life value of non-human beings and cultivating ecological ethical awareness. Like Nim in the novel, he learns the "tree language" to understand the needs of trees and actively guards the forest. At the social level, building an 'ecological community', incorporating ecological protection into social development plans, and balancing economic interests and ecological needs. The "Ancient Tree Protection Regulations" implemented by some cities in the novel ensure the survival rights of trees through institutional design. At the level of civilization, we should

establish a "symbiotic civilization concept", abandon the narrative of "human conquest of nature", and construct a new paradigm of civilization where humans and nature coexist. The ending of the novel, where surviving humans grow together with trees, is a literary metaphor for this symbiotic civilization view.

CONCLUSION

Richard Bowers' "The Overstory" innovatively constructs a "tree narrative" system from a non-human centered perspective, establishing the narrative subject status of trees through the transformation of narrative perspectives, the extension of narrative time, and the juxtaposition of narrative structures. This narrative system contains profound narrative ethics: based on the "innate value" of trees, it constructs an ethical relationship of "coexistence and awe", and demonstrates the ethical practice path through the "ecological awakening" of human characters. At the same time, the "tree narrative" criticizes anthropocentrism in literary form, warns of the seriousness of the biodiversity crisis, and points to an ecological redemption path from "conquest" to "conservation".

The "tree narrative" in "The Overstory" provides a new paradigm for ecological literature creation and also offers inspiration for contemporary humans to cope with ecological crises: only by abandoning the cognitive arrogance of anthropocentrism, recognizing the life value of non-human beings, and constructing a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, can sustainable ecological development be achieved. Future ecological literature research can further expand the boundaries of "non-human narratives", explore more narrative possibilities for non-human entities, and provide richer literary carriers for the dissemination of ecological ethics.

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