



## **“Being kind toward everything alive”: Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic in Richard Powers’ *Bewilderment***

Maryam Azizi<sup>1</sup>, Mohammad-Javad Haj’jari<sup>2,\*</sup>, and Nasser Maleki<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*MA in English Literature, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran,  
ORCID: 0000-0002-1756-4529  
Email: m.azadanipour@gmail.com*

<sup>2\*</sup>*Corresponding Author: Assistant Professor of English Literature, English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran,  
ORCID: 0000-0002-2704-4930  
Email: hajjari.mohammad@razi.ac.ir*

<sup>3</sup>*Associate Professor of English Literature, English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran,  
ORCID: 0000-0001-6379-3114  
Email: n.maleki@razi.ac.ir*

### **Abstract**

Many critics have read David Mamet’s (1993) *Oleanna* as a locale for issues of gender, misogyny, and sexual harassment. Another group, however, believe that it is the potentials of language and its manipulation which are central to the play, which need to be delved into. In line with the latter view, the present article assumes that the interactions of both John and Carol in this two-character play exemplify an interview in which they constantly attempt to preserve their faces through adopting a number of linguistic avoidance strategies. Therefore, by drawing upon linguistic avoidance frameworks suggested by Janney (1999) and Anchimbe (2009), the present article links up linguistic avoidance to Spencer-Oatey’s (2000) notion of rapport management and shows to what extent John and Carol adopt these strategies to attend to their personal and professional face needs at the cost of further alienation and frustration. The findings of this paper are also an affirmation of Žegarac and Spencer-Oatey (2013) who argue that participants’ self-oriented perspective due to face concerns may cause difficulties within joint projects, which is a barricade to spirit of cooperation and reciprocity.

**Keywords:** linguistic avoidance, rapport management, cooperation, face concerns, *Oleanna*

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## Introduction

As long as humanity continues to consider Nature and its non-human inhabitants as the Other and mere resources at its disposal, it is unlikely to find a viable solution to the current environmental crises. What environmentalists call "environmental injustice" and the irreversible depletion of "nonrenewable resources" highlight a fundamental flaw in our relationship with Nature (Hailwood, 2015, p. 1). Additionally, there is a prevailing belief that human alienation from Nature is the primary cause of such crises.

In this sense, it is crucial for humanity to strive towards establishing a harmonious and balanced relationship with nature, recognizing all its components as integral parts of creation that possess inherent value. In other words, it is imperative to acknowledge equality among the various inhabitants of the Earth. This requires humanity to diligently preserve the health and well-being of all its settlers and understand that if Nature continues to be abused, irreparable harm will befall human existence. As Aldo Leopold, the environmentalist, states in a 1992 essay, there exists "between man and the earth a closer and deeper relation than would necessarily follow the mechanistic conception of the earth" (1992, p. 47)

The emergence of ecocriticism as a scholarly movement has shed light on the detrimental effects of anthropocentrism—that human beings alone possess intrinsic value above all creatures—on the present environmental crises or the "Anthropocene". The term stands for the beginning of human disastrous impact on Earth since 1800 up to the present day (Steffen et al., 2007). However, certain archaeological studies reveal that "anthropogenic changes result[ed] from early agriculture in Eurasia, including the start of forest clearance by 8000 years ago and of rice irrigation by 5000 years ago" (Ruddiman, 2003, p. 261). It could have also begun "from the onset of Neolithic agriculture and gradual rise in carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) since ~6000 years ago and methane since ~4000 years ago" (Glikson, 2013, p. 89). As such, it is the main cause for "a precipitous rise in worldwide GDP, fertilizer consumption, paper consumption, foreign direct investment, international tourism, and population" (Di Leo, 2023, p. 314).

Just as humans are social beings sociologically, no one can deny that, ecologically, they are merely a fraction of nature, dependent on it for survival while contributing to its totality and systematic consistency. Advocates of this green perspective argue that to address current and future environmental challenges, we must decisively reject anthropocentrism and develop a symbiotic relationship with nature. No hierarchy should exist within the chain of being.

A breakthrough theory providing necessary guidelines for this relationship is Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" theory, which helps us recognize our ethical responsibilities towards non-human beings. In *Sand County Almanac* (1968), Leopold foregrounds the essential harmony in Nature through poetic language, highlighting the interconnected relationships within the network of nature. In this network, humans are only one organ of a coordinated whole, dependent on the survival of others like soil, atmosphere, mountains, and forests.

Leopold argues that each being, out of instinct or acquired wisdom, is a small fraction of a united community on the land. However, humanity often transgresses its own rights, seeking dominance in this community. The “land ethic” imposes constraints on humans’ treatment of nature, reviving the lives and rights of all ecosystem members and expanding the community to embrace soil, water, plants, and animals (1968, pp. 203-204). Leopold calls for a “new ethic” to address humans’ association with the Earth and its inhabitants, especially animals and plants (Leopold, 1968, p. 203). His scrutiny of human relations with the Earth is considered “the first systematic presentation of ecocentric ethics,” marking him as “the first person to call for a radical rethinking of ethics” by integrating ethics and ecology (DesJardins, 2013, p. 179).

Leopold emphasizes the importance of practicing a spiritual path that acknowledges the inherent rights—or what Leopold calls “biotic right[s]” (1968, p. 211)—of all earthly beings, against utilitarian and libertarian-based approaches to land: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (pp. 224-225). By recognizing and embracing our interconnectedness with nature, we can cultivate a deep sense of respect and reverence for all forms of life to harmoniously coexist with the ecosystem. Such ecological themes, including climate change and the loss of biodiversity, provide humanity with effective strategies and play significant roles in forming the sociocultural consciousness of environmental crises in recent eco-fiction. The rise of such narratives in recent decades has greatly influenced policymaking and public concerns about the perils threatening our Earth.

For Richard Powers, the novelist, in an interview about the publication of *Bewilderment* (2021), “the real-world consequences of catastrophic planetary change have become more real and more present and more immediate” (Wolfson, 2021). In this regard, his *Bewilderment* scientifically explores how the disconnected relationship between humans and Nature has so far negatively affected both. Through his science fiction, Powers presents us with imaginative explorations of “the implications of present-day contemporary scientific theories and technologies” (Taylor, 2013, p. 75). *Bewilderment* is a particular case in point in which Powers introduces Nature as a therapy for the ill modern mentality that has abused it. It shows how, as a character in the story says, “There’s something wrong with us” in treating Nature throughout history (2021, p. 109). By choosing a small boy “on the spectrum” (p. 11) as the protagonist who takes refuge in Nature for treatment, Powers suggests that “everyone alive on this fluke little planet” is “on the spectrum” due to the “syndromes linked to the billion pounds of toxins sprayed on the country’s food supply each year,” as the boy’s father reflects (pp. 10-11). In other words, Powers suggests how human beings still lack what Leopold calls “ecological conscience”. Such awareness is “a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land” (1968, p. 221), developed over decades, perhaps since H. D. Thoreau’s (1854) “emphasis on physical materialism, ecological connectedness, and the implications of humanity and its actions within the natural world” (Reno, 2022, p. 116). This concern evolved “most fully in the late 1940s as the land ethic” that helped with a great change of worldview from considering “nature as having only

instrumental value" to Nature as having "an intrinsic worth" (DesJardins, 2013, p. 180).

This article aims to demonstrate how, through Leopold's theory, Powers' concern with humanity's feeling of bewilderment on Earth—understood as public ecological ignorance—can lead to environmentalist activism for the preservation of Nature and the balance between all species. To this end, the theoretical underpinnings of Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" theory will be explored to investigate how ecocriticism addresses anthropocentrism and its impacts on environmental literature. Examining Powers' *Bewilderment* through this lens will provide new insights into how adopting a land ethic in contemporary eco-fiction can aid in revising environmental policies and practices.

### Literature Review

Research on *Bewilderment* is currently limited due to its recent publication. However, several studies illuminate certain ecological concerns and explorations of the interaction between humans and Nature as depicted in the novel. To begin with, Heil (2016) explores how Powers integrates ecological themes into his narratives, examining the relationship between humans and the natural world. Her book highlights Powers' interest in the non-propositional aspects of cognition, which includes understanding ecological and environmental concerns through the mediation of fictional narratives. Meanwhile, Byers (2009) notes that a significant feature of Powers' fictional technique is his use of alternating narration between two separate stories. These stories might share a common protagonist, concern intersecting lives of disparate figures, or explore chains of cause and effect, as seen in *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment*. Salami and Asaadi (2022) depict *Bewilderment* as envisioning a dystopian future marked by environmental disasters, portraying Powers' view of human life disconnected from nature. Their study argues that Powers uses Bergenmar and Jakob von Uexküll's notion of *Umwelt*—a unique sensory world—to reinterpret the strengths of neurodiverse populations. Additionally, Thomas Armstrong's analogy between the human brain and the ecosystem informs their analysis of *Bewilderment* as "a revisionist neuronovel," offering a unique perspective on the ecosystem. A relevant study further explores the ethical dimensions of human interaction with nature. Song (2023) offer an intriguing viewpoint on posthumanism and ethical issues in *Bewilderment*. They emphasize the characters Alyssa and Robin, mother and son, who demonstrate a deep bond with plants and animals, showcasing the novel's exploration of interspecies communication and the idea of 'ecstasy'—a state that goes beyond mere existence to embrace the presence of others. This issue is further analyzed by Mirza and Ahmad (2024), as they apply the concept of "biophilia" to *Bewilderment*, exploring themes of "solastalgia and eco-anxiety." They argue that the characters' love of Nature soothes them during turbulent times (p. 78). Altogether, while these studies contribute to understanding Powers' ecological perspectives, they fail to address the core issue of anthropocentrism. This study thus delves into the ethics of land, a philosophical question that anthropocentrism has historically overlooked.

## Method

In our era, the Anthropocene, human activity on Earth has negatively affected the ecosystem, making it “necessary to declare a new epoch to signify this impact” (Trexler, 2015, p. 1). This involves an attempt by humans to see Nature in itself. The main question here is, “How does it feel to live in the Anthropocene?” A “humanist approach to the Anthropocene” can thus better help us comprehend living in a time of climate change and crisis, as “we are asked on a daily basis to respond to a barrage of often conflicting information and stimuli” by capitalist systems around the world” (Reno, 2022, p. 6). Consequently, many ecocritical approaches concentrate mainly on the practical or economic benefits of conservation, which, in action, face conflicts of interest, since the basic challenge of the Anthropocene “is that we must channel dissonance into ethical action” (Reno, 2022, p. 22). That is why Leopold’s “land ethic,” by introducing an ethical obligation to the cause, targets the essence of environmental activism. Moreover, it has a holistic approach that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all natural elements and their symbiosis.

The present paper applies a content-based analysis of *Bewilderment* in light of Leopold’s “land ethic” theory. The research method, which is library-based and conducted through a thematic analysis, undertakes an interdisciplinary approach to read Powers’ latest novel under ecocriticism. This highlights its environmental message as a serious warning against anthropocentrism. Regarding the nature of Powers’ fictional contribution to environmentalism, this paper foregrounds the realistic basis of Powers’ concerns and the truth-value of his eco-friendly solutions for environmental crises.

## Discussion

### Challenging Anthropocentrism: The Necessity of Reviving Leopoldian Land Ethics

Human awareness of environmental crises has narrowed down over the recent century as capitalists have progressively controlled each individual’s identity and contributions in industrial societies. In other words, the industrial power structure has either blinded humanity not to see how Nature is being exploited or it has brainwashed humanity to see the exploitation of Nature as beneficial for public good. That is why challenging anthropocentrism serves as the core principle of environmentalism against the unjust belief in human superiority on Earth. Val Plumwood (1994), the Australian environmentalist, criticizes all forms of “hegemonic centrism”, including “Eurocentrism”, “androcentrism” and other types of “centrism” that oppress cultural norms. Anthropocentrism, in particular, defines Nature as “the Other” solely for the sake of human interests and reinforces the rejection of any genuine emotional connection between humans and Nature (1994, pp. 141-142). For the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1973), who coined the concept of “deep ecology” (Krabbe, 2010, p. 530), traditional environmentalism is inherently anthropocentric as it is concerned with preserving land, not for “the intrinsic value” that traditional environmentalists grant it but for the benefits humans can have from it. Naess’s “deep ecology” challenges the “industrial technology” that has historically asserted control over Nature and exploited it for humankind (Moore,

2017, p. 6). Naess (1973) believes that environmentalists should adopt a holistic perspective that considers moral and legal rights for the entire environment as a whole. In fact, environmentalism is better to seek to establish an ethical framework in which humans set aside all traditional worldviews about various forms of "centrism" and wholeheartedly embrace the eternal truth of life based on equality among all species. That is why ecocriticism mainly tries to challenge the approach of those environmentalists who aim to protect the ecosystem solely for the benefit of humankind. It is thus necessary to foster greater awareness of human-nature interdependence by rebuilding connections between humans and the natural world, a fact requiring a comprehensive vision to include all natural beings, or what environmentalists, according to Varner (2002), call "practical" and "ethical" holism in environmental studies. While the former addresses ecosystems and biotic communities as intricate systems requiring comprehensive management, the latter ascribes inherent value to those entities. For Varner, environmentalists, either philosophers or activists, argue that addressing the "ecological crisis" requires a profound shift in our collective mindset towards a comprehensive environmental ethic. They believe that only by embracing such a holistic approach can we effectively tackle the environmental challenges we face. Looking for such an ethic is traced to Aldo Leopold, called the "patron saint" of environmental ethics (p. 10), who defined morally right actions as those that "tend to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (Leopold, 1968, pp. 224-25). He stressed that "land ethic . . . implies respect for [one's] fellow members [of the biotic community], and also respect for the community as such" (p. 204). As Soleimani et al. (2024) assert, to practice the ecological ethics that recognizes the diversity of all species in nature, "human beings need undergo a fundamental change and transformation in their way of thinking and their belief" (p. 237). In this sense, adopting Leopold's "land ethic" is seen as essential for fostering a deep respect for all members of the biotic community and ensuring the integrity of the ecosystem.

Leopold's "land ethic" theory aligns with "ethical" holism as he attributes intrinsic value to ecosystems. In *Sand County Almanac*, a great work in green theory, Leopold argues that the developing environmental movements of his time are the beginning of a public affirmation of a "land ethic" theory that

simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land . . . [A] land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such. (1968, p. 204)

Leopold emphasizes the importance of preserving the "integrity", "stability" and "beauty" of the biotic community as the most effective approach to nurture Nature as a whole (1968, pp. 224-225). The "land ethic", under his care, entails respecting both the members of the biotic community and the community itself. He further considers this "land ethic" as both an "evolutionary possibility" and an "ecological necessity" (pp. 203-204). It is necessary to recall that his theory is a form of "ethical holism", that is, the concepts of "right and wrong are a function of the well-being of the community, not of its constituent members". In other words,

it is ethically allowed to kill an individual animal as long as the “integrity, stability, and beauty” of its population is conserved (DesJardins, 2013, pp. 183-184). Therefore, harmony in Nature for Leopold means the ecological balance that must exist between all the members within the community of nature. Furthermore, the coral value of Nature as the subject of ultimate obedience and respect on humans’ part connects Leopold’s theory to “anthropocosmic environmental ethics”, according to which humans form a “microcosm” in relation to the “macrocosm of the universe” (Tucker, 1998, p. 410). For Mickey (2007), in all anthropocosmic approaches to nature, humanity is “intimately intertwined” with nature. Instead of valuing such tendencies as anthropocentrism that marginalize nature, anthropocosmic approaches to land ethic try to smooth “the mutual implication of humanity and the natural world, thereby affirming the[ir] interconnectedness and mutual constitution” (p. 226). Therefore, these approaches emphasize a harmonious coexistence where humanity and Nature are deeply interconnected and mutually sustaining.

Ecocriticism basically invites humans to acknowledge “biophilic” natural sentiments which are “nonmoral emotional reaction[s]” to the community of Nature as part of our “genetic constitution” (Ouderkirk & Hill, 2002, p. 4). For Leopold, such biophilia is respecting all the natural resources by keeping the balance in nature: “individual members of that community can still be treated as resources as long as the community itself is respected” (DesJardins, 2013, p. 181). It is an undeniable fact that human beings depend upon Nature for survival, but there is a major difference between their perspectives on Nature when they consider themselves as either a part of Nature or its master. For Leopold, the land is a community where members have predefined roles and duties. To ethically care for nature, we must acknowledge the vital significance of every living being, regardless of their benefits for humanity in maintaining stable and healthy ecosystems. We need to shed prejudice and conceit to accept ourselves as equal members of the land community. That is how the “land ethic” theory opposes anthropocentrism by supporting equal rights among all living things. As part of a united community, each entity’s existence contributes to the community’s stability, health, and beauty (1968, pp. 203- 208).

For DesJardins (2013), building upon Leopold’s theory, “in a harmonious and stable relationship”, every community member provides for others’ survival (2013, p. 183). However, for Di Leo (2023), the question is “how one negotiates the anti-realist, anti-humanist, and anti-essentialist positions of many literary and cultural theorists with the realism, humanism, and essentialism of ecotheorists such as Leopold”. In other words, for most of the green theorists, Nature is neither a social construction nor a discourse to be “deconstructed”; Nature has “essence and is real” and must “be saved” (p. 307). Depriving Nature of its inherent rights is to cut the flow of vital energy that runs through it: “Land,” Leopold states, “is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals” (1968, 253). In this light, recognizing and preserving the inherent rights of Nature is imperative to maintaining the flow of vital energy that sustains all life within the ecological community.



### **Land Ethics as Essential Kindness Toward Living Species in *Bewilderment***

The idea of the Anthropocene, as Trexler (2015) elaborates, sheds light on the surge of climate change fiction. Initially, these novels explored the theoretical changes in global climate through concepts like terraforming, nuclear winter, or geological processes. During the 1970s and 1980s, concern for human-caused global warming grew, but it was often treated in fiction alongside other environmental issues such as deforestation, urban sprawl, toxic waste, and ozone layer depletion. In the early 1990s, speculative fiction about climate change started to surface, growing throughout the decade in tandem with solidifying scientific evidence and increasing international calls for climate policy. The 2000s saw intense scientific demands for action, met with equally stubborn international politics. To date, most Anthropocene fiction grapples with the tension between the reality of catastrophic global warming and the failure to act. In this context, fiction has served as a platform to explain, predict, implore, and mourn (2015, pp. 9-10). Climate change fiction has thus evolved to reflect the ongoing tension between the scientific reality of global warming and humanity's failure to address it effectively.

In the 21<sup>st</sup>-century context of climate change fiction, the Earth is not well in *Bewilderment*: summer floods have contaminated the drinking water of millions of people, "spreading hepatitis and salmonellosis across the South"; heat stress in the West is killing older people; jungle areas are on fire (Powers, 2021, p. 139); "the stem rust that had killed a quarter of the wheat harvest in China and Ukraine had been found in Nebraska"; the water from the melting Arctic is flooding into the Atlantic; and "a hideous infection" is hitting the cattle in Texas (p. 224). These signs of global climate change are in fact what environmentalists worry about in reality when the ever-increasing effects of the Anthropocene is concerned: "humanity's probable impacts on geophysical and biological systems for millennia to come" (Trexler, 2015, p. 1). Powers' storytelling in *Bewilderment* is a magnificent display of the ability to capture the essence and profound significance of the Anthropocene in light of Leopold's theory. Powers skillfully weaves together the intricate tapestry of the natural world, drawing attention to the delicate balance that exists in Nature and the consequences that arise when humans ignore or abuse it. Via his cautionary tale, he warns us of the dire implications of human ignorance of the environment, vividly illustrating the far-reaching impact of our actions against the ecosystem that sustains us. With each page turned, Powers unravels the intricate web of interconnectivity, revealing how disruptions in Nature can reverberate through the intricate fabric of our own existence, especially when the rights of other species like animals and plants are concerned. It is in this light that the "land ethic" theory advocates the inherent rights of animals, recognizing them as human allies instead of properties. Just as it rejects discrimination based on intelligence, emphasizing a democratic framework rooted in inherent worth, Powers acknowledges animal intelligence, highlighting interconnectedness in all ecosystems where every being has a purpose.

As a "Science-fiction ecological catastrophe" fiction – a genre that "peaked in the early 1970s, in the wake of many public environmental disasters and the establishing of the Environmental Protection Agency" in the USA (Moore, 2017, p.



222) – *Bewilderment* recounts how, in the near future exposed to environmental degradation, the widowed astrobiologist Theo Byrne tries to save his nine-year-old son Robin, who is “in trouble with this world” (Powers, 2021, p. 7), from the effects of the Asperger syndrome, obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), specifically after his mother’s death that has left the child emotionally down. Resisting any psychoactive treatment for Robin recommended by his school, Theo turns instead to an experimental therapy to help his son. He decides to take Robin to the wild on a camping trip. Experiencing pure Nature provides them with a chance to grow out of the grief they currently face. Sleeping the night in the woods in their “special trip[s]” under the Milky Way’s “four hundred billion stars” bestows them with ultimate pleasure (p. 9). Back to civilization, when they have to, “Robin would be back in a school he hated, surrounded by kids he couldn’t help spooking” (p. 32). With the help of his late wife’s friend, Theo uses artificial intelligence and his expertise to enable Robin “to attend to and control his own feelings, the same way behavioral therapy does, only with an instant, visible scorecard” (p. 89). It helps him to remember and maintain only his mother’s positive qualities, which were eco-friendly as well. This sort of behavioral training helps Robin so much, so that he follows his mother’s environmental activism and vegan lifestyle – he even despises his own birthday cake as it is not “vegan” (p. 15). Theo’s treatment of his son highlights the fact that our problems originate from our mentalities and our mentalities are open to positive change. The loss of Robin’s environmental activist mother, as it resembles the possible loss of the Earth in case of human environmental ignorance, is substituted by Robin’s awareness of the human condition and the environmental miseries endangering it. Although both father and son are equally passionate about climate change, it is the son who stands for the spirit of the young 21st century that must take action for a better future of the Earth. For Powers, as reflected by Theo, “Nine [Robin’s age] is the age of great turning. Maybe humanity was a nine-year-old, not yet grown up, not a little kid anymore. Seemingly in control, but always on the verge of rage” (2021, p. 54). In Powers’ words, children “feel the magic of the living world”; they are “pantheists” and “connect to the nonhuman”. That is why “any adult with an active, engaged, intense, intelligent child now is going to have a hard time answering their questions about what’s happening. ... ‘Is this really what’s happening and why are you letting this happen?’” Moreover, Power continues in his interview, “What I’m seeing in children is a lot of anger and a lot of frustration. But I’m also seeing a huge upsurge in activism and engagement” (Wolfson, 2021). For Theo, “ten thousand children with Robin’s new eyes might teach us how to live on Earth” (Powers, 2021, p. 162). People of the Earth, in other words, need such eyes to see the miseries of their planet and try to save it.

In *Bewilderment*, Robin as an environmental activist, whose name was given to her by his mom after her “favorite bird” (Powers, 2021, p. 17), represents a segment of the society that is deeply concerned with the environmental concerns unfolding worldwide. Growing up in a family where his father is an astrobiologist and his late mother was a lawyer and animal rights activist, Robin is exposed to the importance of Nature and the consequences of human actions against the environment. Influenced by his mother’s values, Robin embodies a deep

commitment to environmental causes and animal welfare, setting him apart from his society. His admiration for his mother, as if she is Mother Nature, even inspires him to become an advocate for the environment, aspiring to make a positive impact on the world. He even falls in love with "the world's most famous fourteen-year-old", the environmental activist Inga Alder who "shame[s] the Council of the European Union into meeting the emissions reductions they had long ago promised" (p. 110). "She's like me, Dad," Robin once reflects (p. 111). She seems to have been modeled after Greta Thunberg, the Swedish environmental activist known for challenging leaders around the world to take immediate action against climate change, who is also Powers' subject of discussion in an interview about *Bewilderment* (Powers, 2019). For Theo, "Inga Alder opened my son's feedback-primed mind to a truth I myself never quite grasped: the world is an experiment in inventing validity, and conviction is its only proof" (p. 102).

Robin's distinct behavior and mental challenges defy a straightforward diagnosis, with his complex condition posing a challenge to physicians. "I never believed the diagnoses the doctors settled on my son," his father reflects. "There's something wrong" with Robin's condition as it has "three different names over as many decades" with "two subcategories to account for completely contradictory symptoms" as "the country's most commonly diagnosed childhood disorder" for which "two different physicians want to prescribe three different medications" (Powers, 2021, p. 10). One interpretation suggests that Robin's profound ecological consciousness shapes his unique perspective and struggles, deeply influencing his experiences and actions. Powers emphasizes the societal differences arising from Robin's eco-consciousness and immersion in Nature that offer a contrast to the fast-paced urban life, reflecting the modern generation's mental state or, better say, bewilderment in the face of ecological crises. In this light, *Bewilderment* illuminates the contrast between those with an ecological awakening and others drawn to modern indulgence, reflecting individuals like Robin who seek solace in nature. As Powers, before the first chapter opens, quotes from the biologist Rachel Louise, "Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts" (p. 5).

For Powers, the dominant sense of bewilderment, or "eco-anxiety" (Mirza and Ahmad, 2024, p. 85), that has haunted humanity proves that our species has lost something foundational – "There's something wrong with us," Robin holds (2021, p. 109) – necessitating a thorough revolutionary critique against global policies and the implementation of remedies. In Moore's view, in contrast to anthropocentrism, "ecocentrism (ecosystem-centered ethics)" emphasizes the "intrinsic value" of all forms of life. "Biocentrism," an approximately relevant concept, also propagates "a life-centered ethics" (2017, p. 6), which, for the environmental philosopher P. W. Taylor (1986), accounts for "the obligations and responsibilities we have with respect to the wild animals and plants". These responsibilities originate from specific "moral relations" between humans and nature, not being there "simply as an object to be exploited by us" (p. 12). The ultimate solution to address this problem lies in overcoming our alienation from nature, as reflected in environmental philosophies like "deep ecology", "eco-feminism", and "bioregionalism" that

directly link the problems faced by humanity to social and political causes. These philosophies foreground the human-nature interconnectedness, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to address the current environmental crises (Hailwood, 2015, p. 2). In *Bewilderment*, Theo challenges the scientific methods of treatment prescribed for Robin and applies a natural treatment instead, that is, taking refuge in nature. “Watching medicine fail my child,” Thei says, “I developed a crackpot theory: Life is something we need to stop correcting. ... Every one of us is an experiment, and we don’t even know what the experiment is testing” (Powers, 2021, p. 11). On his trips to the wild, Robin acts like a reporting camera, just as he is sketching constantly, recording every animal and plant in details with his childish curiosity and enthusiasm: “Wildlife bingo. His new favorite game” while crowded places full of people “unnerve” him, making him “wince” (Powers, 2021, p. 12). Such delight in the very Nature away from the human-made places is what is missing for the modern humanity. In this sense, even “the sight of the road through the trees . . . the cars, the asphalt, the sign listing all the regulations” crushes Theo; “after a night in the woods,” he reflects, “the trailhead parking lot felt like death. I did my best not to show Robin” (p. 36).

Modern urban lifestyle and the capitalism at work pose significant barriers to establish a meaningful and functional connection with nature; the often-denatured essence of urban living tends to distance individuals from the natural world. However, for ecological maintenance, “Human disturbances should not exceed the spatial and temporal scales of natural disturbances” (Ouderkirk & Hill, 2002, p. 97). Theo, a scientist himself, has become aware of this essential fact and his revolutionary decision to treat his son according to Nature is controversial as it is against the very norms of the society that has helped him to become a scientist. For Theo, as for his late wife, civilization often undermines the vitality of life by promoting an artificial existence wherein individuals struggle to perceive the presence of Nature and their deep affinity with it. “Why is it so hard,” Theo once wonders, “for people to see what’s happening?” (Powers, 2021, p. 119). According to Thoreau (1854), whose *Walden* “powerfully affected” environmentalists like Leopold who greatly admired him for his “concerns about the natural habitat” (Levine et al., 2017, p. 952), “Men have become tools of their tools” (Thoreau, 1854, p. 37). That is to say we find ourselves under the influence of human-made objects that dictate norms and mediate our interactions with nature. Powers criticizes technology when, in fact, human beings have gone too far to even ignore their intuition and intrinsic value. “In this place,” Theo complains, “with such a species, trapped in such technologies, even a simple head count grew impossible. Only pure bewilderment kept us from civil war” (Powers, 2021, p. 216). For Theo, in other words, people are more involved with their devices than meaningful human interactions.

Robin’s association with Nature is not taken as something exposed to him out of psychotherapy for his emotional breakdown but as some essential feature of being human; he wholeheartedly considers himself as a part of nature. “I’m inside everything,” he addresses his dad, “Look where we are! That tree. This grass!” (Powers, 2021, p. 162). The problem here is, according to Leopold, “man the

conqueror versus man the biotic citizen" (1968, p. 223). Nature is therapeutic for Robin; he is the one true habitat wherein the human spirit meets other members of the biotic community and expresses his sense of belonging. Mother Nature allows Robin to explore his true self and express his emotions freely without the fear of judgement. In this natural environment, he exudes creativity, tranquility, and a genuine eagerness to learn about the environment. Powers suggests that by reconnecting with nature, not only we can find solace and inner peace but also we may gain insights into the purpose and meaning of life.

By promoting a non-anthropocentric perspective in *Bewilderment*, Powers envisions a humble, democratic society that values Nature as a whole. He presents Buddhist virtues and meditation practices as advocates for the well-being of all living beings, as mediated through Robin's mother Alyssa's deep connection with Nature through her Buddhist beliefs. Women who "have valuable experiences in sustainable management of nature ... can work to shape an ecological culture of equality." They, therefore, "emerge as cultural agents who debate the essentialized dichotomy of nature/culture" (Mohammadi Achachelooei, 2024, p. 180). As Theo reflects in the novel, Alyssa "was a dynamo, cranking out fully researched action plans for one of the country's leading animal rights NGOs every other week" (Powers, 2021, p. 50). The reverence for all forms of life in Buddhism underpins her commitment to non-harming measures towards Nature and ultimately shapes her impassioned advocacy for animal rights: "May all sentient beings . . . be free from needless suffering," Theo and Robin's thus reflect the Buddhist "Four Immeasurables" of "Being kind toward everything alive. Staying level and steady. Feeling happy for any creature anywhere that is happy. And remembering that any suffering is also yours" (p. 28). Contrasting anthropocentrism with biocentrism, Grayling (2010) prompts the idea that that "all life is valuable, not just human life". He believes that holding unto an anthropocentric worldview is "to see everything as having humankind . . . as the measure . . . to think that nothing has greater value than human beings, . . . that everything else can legitimately be bent to the service . . . of humanity" (2010, p. 27). This philosophy converges with Leopold's "land ethic" theory, emphasizing the implementation of limitations in human interactions with Nature to recognize our role as a part of the ecosystem rather than its master. Criticizing yearly hunting games throughout the country as she witnesses "[p]ickup trucks filled with carcasses" that "pulled up and unloaded their mounds onto the scales" to award "those who had bagged the most poundage over four days" with "guns, scopes, and lures that would make next year's contest even more one-sided" (p. 54), Alyssa once openly announces her complaint in a public lecture. For her, these hunters ignore the "[e]ffects of lost animals on ravaged ecosystems" since only two percent "by weight of animals left on Earth" were wild animals, the rest being either *Homo sapiens* or their harvested food. For her, the few remaining wild animals need "a little break" (p. 54). This protest is best reflected in one of her announcements about human relationship with animals:

The creatures of this state do not belong to us. We hold them in our trust.  
The first people who lived here knew: all animals are our relatives. Our

ancestors and our descendants are watching our stewardship. Let's make them proud. (pp. 54-55)

To ethically treat nature, we must respect equality among all the members of the land against any form of anthropocentrism. Alyssa's affection for nature, and the legacy she leaves for Robin, further reveals an inherent symbiosis between humans and animals, a fact that lies at the core of Leopold's theory. According to Schultz (2002), when an individual feels a high affinity with Nature as part of his / her identity, it is called "human-nature connectedness". This "psychological model for inclusion with nature" has three parts, each revealing an aspect of the association between humans and nature: "cognitive (connectedness), affective (caring), and behavioral (commitment)" (p. 61).

The first one is "the core of a connection with nature" and stands for the extent to which each human being includes Nature within his / her "cognitive representation of self". By one's self, Schultz refers to one's speculations and feelings about their selfhood (p. 67). Theo reveals this aspect of human Nature when he confesses that "a person had ten times more bacterial cells than human cells and how we needed a hundred times more bacterial than human DNA to keep the organism going" (Powers, 2021, p. 64).

The second part, "affective (caring)", is how much a person cares about Nature or how much a person feels intimate with nature. For Schultz, "Intimacy involves a sharing of oneself with another, and a deep level of knowledge about the other" (Schultz, 2002, p. 68). This is deeply reflected by Robin in his slogan prepared for a green protest: "HELP ME I'M DYING" (Powers, 2021, p. 114), as he represents animals under extinction. Then, the "behavioral component" involves one's motivation "to act in the best interest of nature" (Schultz, 2002, p. 68). In this light, Alyssa's steadfast dedication to animal rights and her extensive time in Nature epitomize the profound impact of what Schultz calls "human-nature connectedness". This worldview challenges the dichotomy implied from the intrinsic conflict between environmentalism and animal right activism. As Varner (2002) argues, "conservation" as the main objective of environmentalists commonly refers to the "intelligent use of resources in the service of human wants", whereas "preservation" for animal rights activists commonly refers to "leaving nature alone for its own sake" (2002, p. 123). Nonetheless, Alyssa proves otherwise. When Alyssa was alive, she considered herself an inseparable part of the natural world, deeply affected by any harm inflicted upon it. Similarly, Robin's heightened sensitivity to environmental events and human interactions with Nature stem from a deep cognitive connection with nature. "I feel like I belong here," Robin reflects in his excursions to the wild (Powers, 2021, p. 26). It is in Nature that Robin, following his mother's ideals, feels at home; it is Nature and all its members with which Robin falls in love via his childish romantic aspiration; and it is Nature to which he dedicates all his attention. On all their trips to the wild, according to Theo, Robin knows what he achieves. He has bargained with Theo for a digital microscope to display magnified images of natural elements on the screen of their laptop. Robin spends all mornings "trying out pond scum, cells from inside his cheek, and the underside of a maple leaf" under that microscope. He just feels "happy looking at

samples and sketching notes into his notebook" throughout their vacations (p. 15). He even tries to sell his paintings at school to donate the money to the animal cause: "Thousands of creatures are going extinct every year. And so far I've raised zero dollars and zero cents to help them" (p. 108). As a child and an empty medium ready for his mother's ideas, Robin stands for the ideal humankind to treat nature. But for the adults, as Theo believes, "We don't need any bigger miracle than evolution" (p. 56).

The only viable solution within the current state of the Earth involves a shift in our mindset to foster ecological awareness. As long as humans perceive themselves as the divinely appointed rulers of the Earth, as androcentric ideologies hold, neither technology nor science can enact any meaningful change to save the planet. However, a transformative evolution of thought guided Alyssa to dedicate her life to animal rights and fostered her deep affinity with nature. Similarly, it instills ecological consciousness in Robin not to tolerate the brutality inflicted by humans on animals: "They [animals] must really hate us. We stole everything from them," he tells Theo once they witness mistreatment of animals (p. 38). As O'Brien (2022) states, Robin's perspective presents us with "the tragedy of climate change and species loss" that imply "a betrayal of the future of the next generations, but also a threat to the singular beauty and value of creation for its own sake" (2022). In other words, the ongoing climate crisis not only jeopardizes the well-being and future of younger generations but also diminishes the intrinsic beauty and value of the natural world. By viewing these issues through the perspective of Robin, a child deeply affected by these changes, Powers emphasizes the urgency and moral imperative to address environmental challenges for both human and ecological preservation.

Powers delivers a sharp critique of anthropocentrism by using the term "Ponzi scheme", which stands for a fraudulent investment in a nonexistent enterprise to dupe investors of their money, to ironically draw attention to the impact of industrialism on natural resources and ecosystems (2021, p. 33). This is reflected in the discouraging news Theo and Robin listen to on one of their trips: "U.S. and Chinese fleets were playing nuclear cat-and-mouse off Hainan Island. An eighteen-deck cruise ship named Beauty of the Seas exploded off St. John's, Antigua, killing scores of passengers and wounding hundreds more" (p. 41). In other words, investing in what seems to be beneficial for humanity under anthropocentrism ultimately turns out to be catastrophic. As a result, Theo reveals, "Half the world's species were dying" (p. 142). This critique highlights the consequences of humanity's disregard for environmental well-being and the interconnectedness of all life forms. "If some small but critical mass of people recovered a sense of kinship [with nature]," Theo wittily remarks, "economics would become ecology" (p. 162).

As Nature serves Robin as a source of maternal comfort, reminding him of his mother, he embraces the idea that Alyssa is intertwined with the natural world: "She went back into the system," Theo tells Robin to euphemize her death. With his digital microscope as a tool, Robin delves deep into nature, spending extensive hours to forge a spiritual bond to feel a profound kinship with her. He even speculates upon Einstein's theory that energy cannot be created or destroyed; that it can only be changed "from one form to another"; that his mother is not dead



altogether. This anthropocosmic approach to Nature is the primary reason why Nature becomes Robin's sole refuge where he can experience a profound sense of belonging. For Mirza and Ahmad, Robin's "unwavering enthusiasm and active engagement in identifying and observing wildlife reflect his joy and satisfaction in immersing himself in the world." It is consequently evident that "for Robin, nature is not a source of worry or sadness but rather a refuge from emotions" (2024, p. 86). Recalling Leopoldian ethics, humans are seen as integral components of the ecosystem, with nothing being truly destroyed in Nature as they are transformed into something new. Theo's reply to Robin's question about her mother's whereabouts highlights such change of form and energy: "She became other creatures" (Powers, 2021, p. 57).

*Bewilderment* highlights the treatment and regard humans have toward animals, emphasizing the need for acknowledging their rights. Once Theo recounts Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* (1965) – a novel that illustrates the cruelty of using animals for laboratory experiments – for Robin only to evoke his strong opposition to such violations. Curious about his mother's perspective on animal cruelty, Robin has realized that animals hold intrinsic moral worth beyond their usefulness to humans. Such treatment of animals transcends mere kindness and protection, as it entails respecting their fundamental rights, abstaining from meat consumption, prohibiting their exploitation in medical practices, and overriding their freedom. Robin and Alyssa's advocacy of a similar democratic world in which inflicting pain on animals is forbidden reflects Leopold's call for a democratic system in Nature for all beings. As a guardian of the animal realm, Robin regards animals as integral members of a community of various species and opposes their exploitation for experimentation, food, entertainment, and rituals. Rather than attributing human loneliness to inherent solitude, he attributes it to their self-centeredness and refusal to acknowledge their place within the biotic community: "We stole everything from them, Dad. We deserve to be alone" (Powers, 2021, p. 38). Robin even questions the ethical foundations of any religion that mandates inflicting pain on living beings as an expression of devotion. When it comes to the Thanksgiving, it is impossible to coerce him into eating Turkey: "I don't eat animals. Don't make me eat animals" (p. 93). His worldview underscores his empathy for animals and his disapproval of human exploitation, promoting a more modest and harm-free treatment of them.

For Heise (1997), "literary visions of nature as inherently creative, harmonious, and peaceful" are part of what makes them environmentalist (1979, p. 6), and Powers' vision thus envisions a world where living in harmony with Nature is scientifically possible. Powers has both granted and challenged "the notion of humans as the main drivers of the ecology of the earth" (Di Leo, 2023, p. 305), a notion developed under the concept of the Anthropocene. In fact, as Leopold argues, our educational and economic systems are the main reasons that raise obstacles against generating a "land ethic". Understanding ecology is one of the necessities for an ecological apprehension of land, not obtained through education as ecological notions are deliberately ignored in education (1968, pp. 223-24). In this sense, via



Theo and Robin's transcendental linkage with nature, Powers suggests that human beings have misunderstood Nature throughout history.

For Powers, Robin "opens up and transcends his own fury and his own frustration and finds a way of being that's almost religiously transcendent, and it's a great source of inspiration to the adults who see him as he's developing these capacities" (Wolfson, 2021). Being the most intelligent creatures, humans have begun their own demise since the very moment they exploited Nature by taking more than it could offer as a consequence of the lack of true eco-friendly education. By allowing Theo to mentor Robin on his own terms, Powers strongly criticizes the educational system, asserting its alignment with capitalist interests and its role in perpetuating materialism. He argues that individual responsibilities rather than shifting blame to specific organizations are the key to address environmental crises. In an interview Powers reveals that he has always been "conscious that every decision created a million deaths," implying each decision on the global level must take into account the responsibilities that follow (Powers and Fuller, 2003, p. 98). For Robin, "Inga [Alder] doesn't even go to school anymore. She says why bother to study how to live in a future that" teaches children to mistreat Nature (Powers, 2021, p. 117). In DesJardins' terms, "Until we . . . understand nature from a wider and longer-term perspective, we are doomed to mismanage natural ecosystems" (2013, p. 180). Powers thus urges immediate action to protect endangered animals, emphasizing the need to safeguard the future for succeeding generations. He advocates nurturing ecological consciousness in the younger generation to bring about a significant shift in public attitudes.

By directing education within an eco-friendly context, he believes humans can understand the urgency of protecting the planet and its inhabitants, ultimately sparking a societal revolution. As Bentham (1907) prophesied in the late eighteenth century, "The day may come, when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny" (1789 / 1907, p. 311). It is thus meaningful to speculate how Powers has intentionally chosen *Bewilderment* as the title for this novel to refer to the mental aberrance of the modern generation whose sole experience of Nature is confined to artificial green areas around. Only those who experience ecological awakening struggle with this kind of bewilderment, while others try to deny this confusion by living ignorantly under capitalism. For Moore (2017),

if we had a more complete understanding . . . we would not trash our planet, we would be more concerned about the effects of burning fossil fuels, we would do as much as we could to save the few remaining wilderness areas for posterity. (p. 5)

Part of this awakening is "the understanding that there are laws governing the universe", laws that "can help alleviate eco-anxiety by giving us a feeling of order and predictability in the midst of shifts while also supporting biophilia" (Mirza and Ahmad, 2024, p. 85). Although "a completely non-anthropocentric view is finally impossible" in the human realm (Moore, 2017, p. 6), Powers proposes a moderate solution that moves in line with Leopold's theory, that is, a balance

between human interests and a healthy natural environment with all its biotically diverse species safeguarded. As Allysa used to say in her prayers, “May all sentient beings be free from needless suffering” (Powers, 2021, p. 60).

### **Conclusion**

In essence, committed writers like Richard Powers aim to explore where humanity stands and where it should head. They scrutinize our defined roles on this planet and challenge us to rethink them. Powers embraces Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic” theory, advocating for a paradigm shift away from anthropocentrism towards recognizing the intrinsic value of all species and fostering equality and respect among them. This perspective urges us to view our relationship with Nature not as a master-slave dynamic but as one of symbiosis and interdependence. Powers’ *Bewilderment* promotes ecological consciousness, equality among species, and a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. It calls for a profound shift in our mindset, urging us to adopt an ecologically conscious approach and reevaluate our place in nature. Criticizing modern civilization, education, and socio-political policies, *Bewilderment* incorporates scientific facts and psychological insights to highlight the need for environmental ethics against capitalist dominance. Although capitalism and anthropocentrism may not vanish overnight, Powers believes that individuals must reestablish their connection with the environment as active members of the biotic community. The novel reminds us that civilization’s so-called blessings are often curses, necessitating urgent action for human survival and ecological stability. By redefining our relationship with nature, Powers argues, we can transform future generations’ understanding of its importance. He advocates for animal rights, biodiversity preservation, and responsible actions on Earth and beyond.

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### Author's Biography

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**Maryam Azizi** received her MA in English Literature from Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran, in 2023. She is a young researcher in the field, focusing mainly on Ecocriticism and Green Studies.



**Mohammad-Javad Haj'jari** is an Assistant Professor of English Literature at Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran. He is also an established researcher in the field, mostly concerned with Literary Theory and Criticism, Interdisciplinary Studies, Literature and Philosophy, Literary Translation, World Literature, and Postmodernism.



**Nasser Maleki** is an Associate Professor of English Literature at Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran. He is a well-published researcher with four decades of teaching experience on high academic levels. He conducts research in Romanticism, Literary Theory, Comparative Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies at Razi University.