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Transcending Borders: Humanity, Earth, and the Cosmos in Samantha Harvey's *Orbital*

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Abstract:

Samantha Harvey's Orbital (2023) follows six astronauts and cosmonauts aboard the International Space Station as they complete sixteen orbits of Earth over a single day. Rather than relying on dramatic plot twists, the novel develops its philosophical and environmental concerns through observation, routine, memory, and reflection. From orbit, the planet appears as an interconnected whole: national borders become difficult to discern, weather systems move across political divisions, and the thin atmosphere reveals the fragility of life. This paper examines Orbital through the concepts of the Overview Effect, environmental consciousness, global interconnectedness, existential reflection, and the relationship between distance and belonging. It argues that Harvey transforms the space station into a vantage point from which humanity can reconsider political divisions and ecological responsibilities. The astronauts' distance from Earth intensifies their attachment to home, while the novel's attention to sunlight, darkness, oceans, clouds, and storms makes the planet both visually beautiful and materially vulnerable. Its restrained narrative form invites readers to pause and observe rather than seek conventional suspense. Ultimately, Orbital suggests that the cosmic perspective does not make human life insignificant; instead, it makes the planet and its inhabitants more precious. By presenting Earth as a shared home rather than a collection of separate territories, Harvey connects literary reflection with an ethical call for environmental care and human solidarity.

Keywords: Samantha Harvey; Orbital; Overview Effect; Environmental Consciousness; Anthropocene; Global Interconnectedness; Existentialism; Space Literature; Planetary Ethics.

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Introduction:

Samantha Harvey's Orbital, published in 2023, combines literary fiction, philosophical reflection, and elements associated with science fiction. Set aboard the International Space Station, the novel follows six astronauts and cosmonauts from Japan, the United States, Britain, Italy, and Russia through sixteen orbits of Earth in approximately twenty-four hours. Its narrative does not depend on a conventional sequence of crises or a dramatic climax. Instead, Harvey focuses on the crew's scientific routines, physical experience of weightlessness, observations of the planet, memories of family, and reflections on existence. The resulting narrative asks readers to look carefully at Earth and reconsider the relationships that connect human beings to one another and to the nonhuman world.

The view from orbit changes the scale through which the astronauts understand life. From the station, national borders become difficult to see, while oceans, cloud formations, coastlines, and weather systems appear as parts of a continuous planetary environment. Earth looks both beautiful and vulnerable: a living world protected by a thin atmosphere and exposed to the consequences of human activity. The astronauts' perspective makes political boundaries appear provisional in comparison with the shared conditions that sustain life. However, the novel does not suggest that observing Earth from space automatically solves conflict. Rather, it offers a new vantage point from which the limitations of narrow national and personal perspectives become visible.

The novel also balances cosmic distance with emotional attachment. Although the astronauts travel far from their homes, they remain connected to family, memory, grief, and ordinary objects. Brief communications with loved ones offer comfort but may also sharpen loneliness. Their experience suggests that distance can intensify the significance of belonging. Earth is not merely an object viewed through a window; it is the place where relationships, histories, and the conditions of life are rooted.

This paper explores five connected dimensions of Orbital: the philosophical significance of space travel, the Overview Effect, the relationship between humanity and Earth, global interconnectedness, and the novel's reflective narrative form. It argues that Harvey uses the astronauts' orbital perspective to question artificial borders and foreground a planetary ethic. The novel's slow pace and careful descriptions of light, colour, movement, and weather encourage readers to adopt the astronauts' attentive gaze. By connecting cosmic scale with intimate memory, Orbital suggests that awareness of human smallness can deepen rather than diminish responsibility for the world.

Narrative Structure and Philosophical Reflection:

Orbital unfolds over a single day, structured around the station's repeated movement around Earth. Each orbit offers a changing view of sunlight and darkness, creating a rhythm that differs from the ordinary experience of time on the ground. Sixteen sunrises and sunsets occur within the astronauts' day, disrupting familiar assumptions about morning, evening, and the passage of hours. This structure gives the novel a cyclical quality: the station moves forward while repeatedly returning to a view of the same

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planet, each time revealing a different combination of light, shadow, cloud, and surface.

The crew's daily activities are practical and repetitive. Scientific work, equipment maintenance, exercise, and communication continue within the station's confined environment. These routines are important because they prevent the narrative from becoming a purely abstract meditation. Space travel depends on disciplined labour and technological systems, even when the view outside appears extraordinary. Harvey places the extraordinary beside the ordinary, showing that awe and routine coexist. The astronauts' reflections emerge from work, observation, and moments of quiet rather than from spectacular events.

The novel's lack of a conventional crisis is central to its literary method. Instead of asking what dramatic event will occur next, readers are invited to consider what the characters notice and how their perceptions change. The narrative's pace may feel slow, but this slowness supports its purpose. It asks readers to pause and observe, just as the astronauts do. The novel thereby turns attention itself into a form of literary action.

Harvey also links the astronauts' experience to broader questions about time and human existence. The rapid succession of day and night contrasts with the deep history of Earth and the vastness of the cosmos. Human lives appear brief within these larger scales, yet their brevity does not make them meaningless. Family memories, grief, affection, and everyday objects retain their importance even when viewed against the universe. The novel's philosophical effect lies in this balance between cosmic perspective and intimate experience: it encourages humility without insisting that human life is insignificant.

The Overview Effect and the Planetary Gaze:

The Overview Effect describes the reported shift in perspective some astronauts experience when they see Earth from space as a single, interconnected planet. The boundaries that structure political life on the ground are difficult or impossible to distinguish from orbit, while the atmosphere appears thin and vulnerable. Orbital uses this perspective as a literary device to reconsider the way people imagine their home. Earth is no longer experienced only as a collection of countries and territories but as a shared system of oceans, land, clouds, weather, and living beings.

In Harvey's narrative, the planetary gaze makes national borders seem less fundamental than the physical systems that sustain life. Rivers, seas, storms, and air currents do not stop at political boundaries. Environmental damage likewise travels across national lines, making ecological problems difficult to contain within one state's territory. The astronauts' view therefore challenges the assumption that national divisions represent the most important way of organising human responsibility. From above, Earth appears as one place whose inhabitants depend on common conditions.

This shift in perspective also raises questions about political conflict. The astronauts belong to different nations, yet they share a confined workplace and orbit the same planet. Their cooperation provides a small-scale image of international interdependence. From their vantage point, conflicts that dominate public life can appear disproportionate to the

fragility and unity of the planet. Harvey does not imply that political differences are unreal or that historical injustices can be ignored. Rather, she asks readers to recognise that such differences exist within a larger shared environment and should not erase the responsibilities people have to one another.

The Overview Effect is not presented as a guaranteed transformation. A view from space can encourage humility, but ethical change requires more than visual experience. The astronauts' observations become meaningful because the novel connects them to reflection on care, loss, and ecological vulnerability. The reader is invited to imagine what might change if people on Earth were able to perceive the planet less as a possession divided among states and more as a common home. The Overview Effect thus becomes an ethical possibility: it can widen the frame of attention and encourage a more inclusive understanding of human belonging.

Humanity and the Fragility of Earth:

At the heart of Orbital is the relationship between human beings and the planet that sustains them. Earth appears from space as a place of extraordinary beauty, marked by oceans, cloud formations, coastlines, changing light, and the movement of weather. Yet the same perspective reveals fragility. The atmosphere that makes life possible is visually thin against the darkness beyond it. The planet is not an unlimited resource or an indestructible shelter; it is a complex environment on which human survival depends.

Harvey's attention to the physical appearance of Earth encourages ecological awareness without turning the novel into a conventional environmental lecture. The astronauts observe storms, cloud systems, and traces of human activity from a distance. The view allows them to see beauty and damage together. Natural systems continue to move according to processes that disregard national borders, while human activities leave marks on the planet. The contrast between Earth's visual splendour and its vulnerability produces a sense of responsibility rather than simple admiration.

The novel's environmental concern can be read in relation to the Anthropocene, a term commonly used in discussions of the extent to which human activity has altered Earth's systems. The concept foregrounds the scale of human influence, including pollution, resource use, and changes to the environment. In Orbital, human presence is sometimes visible only through small lights or marks on the surface, yet the consequences of human activity can be extensive. The contrast is significant: humanity may appear tiny from orbit while still possessing the capacity to alter the conditions of life.

The astronauts' perspective also questions the assumption that technological progress is automatically beneficial. Space travel represents extraordinary scientific achievement, but it also makes the dependence of human beings on Earth more apparent. Leaving the planet does not eliminate the need for an environment capable of sustaining life. Instead, the experience of distance can renew appreciation for the planet's unique conditions. The novel therefore asks readers to connect scientific curiosity with ecological responsibility.

Environmental care emerges as a shared obligation. The planet is not the responsibility of governments or environmental organisations alone, although institutions have important roles

to play. Individual habits, collective decisions, and political priorities all affect the conditions under which life continues. Orbital's cosmic perspective encourages readers to see environmental protection not as a narrow interest but as a responsibility arising from shared dependence on Earth.

Interconnectedness and Global Consciousness:

Interconnectedness is one of the central ideas developed through the astronauts' view of Earth. People live in different countries, speak different languages, and follow diverse cultural traditions, yet they depend on the same planetary systems. Air, water, climate, food production, and ecological stability connect communities across geographical and political boundaries. The novel makes this connection visible by presenting Earth as a continuous whole rather than a collection of separate territories.

The crew aboard the International Space Station offers a small model of global cooperation. The astronauts and cosmonauts come from different national backgrounds, but their work requires coordination, shared routines, and mutual dependence. Their confined environment makes it difficult to treat national identity as the only meaningful form of belonging. They must rely on one another to maintain the station and carry out their work. This practical interdependence reflects the larger reality that people on Earth share risks and responsibilities, even when political systems encourage competition.

Global consciousness involves recognising that personal and national interests exist within a wider human community. In the novel, the view from space invites the astronauts to think beyond immediate concerns and consider the planet as a whole. Such a perspective is particularly relevant to environmental problems that cross borders. Climate change, air pollution, forest loss, and damage to oceans cannot be solved by isolated action alone. They require cooperation, scientific understanding, and a willingness to consider the interests of people beyond one's own community.

However, global consciousness should not be confused with the claim that all people experience the world equally. Environmental harm and political instability affect communities differently, and some populations have fewer resources to respond. A responsible planetary ethic must recognise both shared dependence and unequal vulnerability. The novel's broad perspective encourages solidarity, but solidarity becomes meaningful only when it is translated into attention to specific lives and circumstances.

Harvey's novel thus links the image of a united planet to a demand for human cooperation. The astronauts' shared experience does not erase their differences; it places those differences within a common framework. Their orbit becomes a reminder that humanity's future depends on its capacity to recognise interdependence without demanding uniformity. The planet can be understood as one home while remaining a place of many cultures, histories, and perspectives.

Isolation, Memory, and the Meaning of Home:

Although Orbital presents a broad view of humanity, it remains attentive to the private experiences of the astronauts. Their physical distance from Earth creates a distinctive form of

isolation. They live in a highly technological environment, surrounded by instruments and procedures, while the planet that sustains their identities remains visible through a window. Their brief communications with family provide comfort, but the delay and distance can make separation more noticeable. Home becomes both a physical place and an emotional network of people, memories, and familiar objects.

The novel's treatment of memory prevents its cosmic perspective from becoming impersonal. The astronauts think about loved ones and experiences from their lives on Earth. Small details—a family member's voice, an ordinary object, or a remembered encounter—carry emotional significance because they connect the crew to a world they cannot presently inhabit. From orbit, Earth is immense and beautiful, but the astronauts' sense of home is often particular and intimate. The planetary view and the personal memory therefore complement each other.

Isolation also sharpens awareness of mortality. The astronauts' lives are brief in comparison with the age of Earth and the scale of the universe, but the novel does not present this difference as a reason for despair. Instead, the fragility of life gives relationships greater value. Love, grief, and memory matter precisely because they occur within limited human time. Cosmic scale can make individual life appear small, yet it can also reveal the preciousness of each experience.

Home in Orbital is not simply a geographical location. It is the place where relationships are formed, where personal histories acquire meaning, and where ordinary life continues under the same sky that the astronauts observe from above. Their longing for home suggests that a planetary ethic must not erase local attachment. Caring for Earth includes caring for the particular communities and relationships that make life meaningful.

The novel thus holds two perspectives together: humanity belongs to a single planet, and individuals belong to particular families, places, and histories. Global consciousness is not achieved by abandoning personal attachments. It emerges when people recognise that the homes they love exist within a shared and vulnerable world.

Time, Existentialism, and the Cosmos:

Orbital's repeated cycles of sunrise and sunset alter the astronauts' ordinary experience of time. On Earth, day and night generally organise work, sleep, social activity, and memory. From the International Space Station, sixteen sunrises and sunsets occur within a single day, making familiar temporal divisions feel unstable. The astronauts' experience encourages reflection on how human beings organise time and how those structures shape their understanding of life.

The novel places human time against the deep history of Earth and the immense scale of the universe. A human life occupies a tiny portion of geological and cosmic time. Yet Harvey does not conclude that individual existence is therefore meaningless. The astronauts continue to remember people, feel loneliness, perform their duties, and respond to the beauty of the planet. These experiences remain meaningful even when measured against an almost unimaginable scale.

This tension is existential. The novel asks readers to consider what gives life value when human beings are neither central to the universe nor permanent within it. Meaning does not arrive as a definitive answer. It emerges

through relationships, attention, responsibility, and the willingness to recognise the world's beauty and vulnerability. The astronauts' observations do not solve the philosophical questions they raise; they make those questions harder to ignore.

The novel's restrained style reinforces this philosophical approach. Rather than providing a dramatic revelation, Harvey allows insight to develop through repeated observation. The crew sees Earth again and again, but each orbit changes the light, the angle, and the visible details. Repetition does not produce sameness; it reveals variation. This structure resembles reflection itself, in which familiar questions return but acquire different significance as circumstances change. The cosmic perspective therefore produces humility without nihilism. Human beings are small in relation to the universe, but they are capable of care and awareness within the world they inhabit. The brevity of life does not cancel responsibility; it may intensify it. If the planet is the only home humans know, then its vulnerability creates an ethical obligation that extends beyond individual lifetimes.

Style, Imagery, and Critical Reception:

A major feature of Orbital is its reflective prose. Harvey attends closely to light, colour, movement, cloud, ocean, and the changing appearance of Earth. The descriptive language invites readers to experience the planet through the astronauts' gaze rather than through a conventional action-driven plot. This method is especially effective because the view from orbit is both visually extraordinary and repetitive. The planet is seen again and again, but changing conditions make each observation distinct.

The novel blends scientific details with emotional and philosophical reflection. The International Space Station is presented as a working environment shaped by routine, equipment, physical discipline, and communication. Against this practical background, the astronauts consider questions about existence, family, conflict, and the planet's future. The scientific setting therefore does not function merely as spectacle. It provides the conditions for a particular way of seeing and thinking.

The absence of a conventional climax may challenge readers who expect a plot organised around escalating conflict. However, the novel's structure supports its thematic aims. The lack of a major crisis shifts attention towards observation and interpretation. The reader is encouraged to notice how the astronauts' perceptions connect personal experience with planetary questions. Slowness becomes a method of contemplation rather than a failure of narrative momentum.

The supplied draft notes positive responses from major publications, including The Guardian and The New York Times, and identifies the novel's recognition through the 2024 Booker Prize and the Hawthornden Prize. Such reception places Orbital within contemporary discussions of literary fiction that combines formal experimentation with environmental and philosophical concerns. The Booker Prize recognition is particularly relevant to the novel's public reception, though critical acclaim should not replace close analysis of the text itself.

The novel's achievement lies in its ability to make a distant viewpoint emotionally immediate. Earth is seen from a perspective few people experience directly, but the astronauts'

memories and feelings keep the view connected to ordinary life. Harvey's style joins the visual grandeur of space with the vulnerability of human relationships, allowing the cosmic and the intimate to illuminate one another.

Conclusion:

Samantha Harvey's Orbital uses the International Space Station as a vantage point from which to reconsider humanity's relationship with Earth, time, and one another. Through six astronauts and cosmonauts completing sixteen orbits in one day, the novel develops a reflective narrative that privileges observation over dramatic action. Its repeated sunrises and sunsets unsettle familiar ideas of time, while its images of oceans, clouds, storms, and the thin atmosphere reveal the beauty and vulnerability of the planet.

The Overview Effect provides a central interpretive framework for understanding the novel's challenge to political borders. From orbit, Earth appears as an interconnected whole, and the natural systems that sustain life disregard the divisions humans create. The crew's international cooperation offers a small model of interdependence, suggesting that humanity's shared future requires solidarity across national boundaries. At the same time, the novel does not erase the importance of personal identity, local history, or unequal vulnerability. The astronauts' memories and longing for home prevent the cosmic perspective from reducing human life to insignificance. Their relationships, grief, and ordinary recollections show that the planet matters not only as a biological environment but also as the setting for meaningful lives. The novel's existential reflections suggest that human smallness can deepen awareness of responsibility rather than lead to despair.

Ultimately, Orbital connects literary form with environmental ethics. Harvey's slow, attentive style encourages readers to pause, observe, and recognise the relationship between beauty and fragility. The novel presents Earth as a shared home that requires care, not an inexhaustible resource divided into isolated territories. By bringing the cosmic and the intimate together, Harvey asks readers to widen their sense of belonging and to treat environmental protection, human cooperation, and everyday acts of care as responsibilities arising from life on a vulnerable planet.

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